

“The Power of Forgiveness”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 13, 2020

Matthew 18: 21-35

Next Sunday evening, as long as the weather cooperates, we will do something we had planned to do on March 15: for the first time in our church’s history, we will burn a mortgage. We had the great joy of announcing this accomplishment at the annual congregational meeting at the end of January, where Troy Judy wrote the final check to the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, or PILP, for an amount over \$300,000. By far, the largest check Troy has ever written in his life! Judy Ricketts, Cindy Hiday, and I then drove to Louisville that week to hand-deliver that final payment, and the folks at PILP were excited – not only for us and this great accomplishment, but also to receive such a large check themselves! We had planned to celebrate this milestone in worship on March 15 – inviting guests who had been instrumental partners when we planned and built this sanctuary more than ten years ago.

Well, we all know what happened in the middle of March. Instead of a joyous worship celebration, we instead had to cancel in-person worship and start gathering virtually. It was the beginning of a long, uncertain road we’ve all be travelling through this pandemic. We still have the bulletins we had printed for that service – do you all remember these? They’re called bulletins! But now that we’ve started to adjust and live into this new normal, we don’t want to postpone this celebration until an undetermined future date. That’s why next Sunday, at the Tailgate Picnic in the parking lot, we will go ahead and burn the mortgage. At least this way, we don’t have to worry about the smoke alarms in the sanctuary going off!

So, here’s something to ponder. What if, two or three years after building the sanctuary, the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program said to us they were forgiving our loan? We spent \$1.5 million to build this sanctuary and make other improvements to our facility. We borrowed \$1,225,000 from PILP over a 20-year loan. What if they had come to us and said, “John Knox, you are doing great things with this new space. You don’t have to pay anymore to us – your loan is forgiven.” How would we have reacted and responded? What would we have done with the monies that had been pledged to pay the loan? What would it have felt like to have such a large debt forgiven?

This came to my mind in light of this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus uses a parable to help us understand the depth of forgiveness that God grants to us. A slave owed his king ten thousand

talents. How much is ten thousand talents? That is the equivalent of 150,000 years' wages of one laborer (18:24). In other words, it was an amount that could never be repaid – certainly not in an individual's lifetime. The king's first reaction is to have the slave sold, along with his family and his possessions, so that the debt might be settled. But it is the slave's pleading which changes the king's mind: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (18:26). And with that, forgiveness is granted; the debt is cleared; the slave's life is spared.

It would be great if that was the end of the story. Then we wouldn't have to think about how we will respond to a friend who wrongs us. Then we wouldn't have to worry about how "being forgiven" changes our relationships with our fellow brother and sister.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. The forgiven slave, even before he has left the king's courtyard, finds a man who owes him the equivalent of a hundred days' wages. Remember: the forgiven slave had just been forgiven the equivalent of 54,000,000 days' wages. That man pleads in the same manner as the forgiven slave had: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But there is no mercy; there is no patience; there is no transformation on the forgiven slave's part. There is only a selfish, limited view of the world, and judgment is substituted for grace.

This is not acceptable behavior for the king, and it is not acceptable behavior for our God. The end to this story is brutal – in its honesty and in its violence. The king will not stand for someone to refuse to give mercy to another when that one has been forgiven himself. And the lesson is brutal: God will not stand for us to live by one set of rules for our neighbor, and another – more gracious – set of rules for our God. There is only one set of rules that apply: forgive one another, as you have been forgiven. That is our call as citizens of the Kingdom, and our mission to a broken, violent, hurting world.

One commentator writes: *The larger context of our passage, which includes all of chapter 18, deals with community and the quality of relationships that promote a healthy one. The foundation of Matthew's understanding is that we are all connected. These connections can be positive or negative, life-giving and affirming, or (they can be) toxic and oppressive. In order to create and maintain communal bonds that are positive, individuals and communities must be able to deal with sin . . . they must be able to handle being fouled. Why? Because relationships, and therefore community, are impacted by our ability or inability to forgive* (Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Vol. 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2020: 314).

The power of forgiveness allows us to let go of grudges that have lost their foundation over so much time. It means ending an argument with your spouse or your child before it is time to go to bed, and letting love replace anger in your heart. It means realizing that it takes more

energy to remain angry with someone than it does to let it go and move on.

The power of forgiveness gives you a long, clear memory of forgiveness that has been offered to you. It means reflecting on those who have shown you grace, and then returning thanks to God for returning you to wholeness in that way. It means changing your first instinct of, "I can't believe you did that!" to "Don't worry about it." It means letting go of the 100 days of debt, realizing the 54,000,000 days you yourself have been forgiven.

Does that mean we just forget the wrongs that have been committed against us? Does that mean abusers or criminals are given a free pass? Far from it. But what the power of forgiveness does mean is that those wrongs that have been committed against us no longer have power over us.

Marjorie Thompson writes: *To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken* ("Moving Toward Forgiveness," *Weavings*, March-April 1992: 19).

Last week, we spoke of how it's on the sinnee to take the first step and seek out forgiveness. Not exactly our natural human instinct, but nevertheless what we are called to do as followers of Christ. This week, the focus is on how forgiveness can truly change your life - allow you to let go of the bonds of hurt that have weighed you down. Instead of staying constrained by the power of the original wound, the power of forgiveness frees us so we might look at our world - and our relationships - in a hope-filled way. No longer are we staying stuck in our past bitterness, but instead moving forward seeking newness and new life.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the following story: *A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?" I answer her, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive him because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you*

keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself" (Harold Kushner, "Letting Go of the Role of Victim," *Spirituality Health*, Winter 1999, 34).

Every week in worship, we pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Some traditions will say "trespasses," and sometimes we will use an ecumenical version that says "sins." But in light of this parable of Jesus on forgiveness, I believe our choice of debts hits even closer to home.

When we are in debt, we owe something to someone. We are not truly free until that debt is paid. Sin is the same. When we sin - against someone or against God - we are in debt, because the relationship is no longer equal. When we ask for God's forgiveness, we are yearning to be free of what we owe, what weighs us down. When we grant someone forgiveness, we are restoring our relationship to a level-playing field. The power of forgiveness makes us free to live a new life of hope.

Let me conclude with the example I started with. While PILP may not have forgiven our loan early as I dreamily theorized, we have been made free of financial debt in less than half the time of the initial loan. We are in this position as a church because of the deep generosity and commitment of hundreds of people these last eleven years, and the incredible response by some specific individuals at the beginning of this year. The ledger is clear; our debts have been paid.

How will we as a community of believers respond to this power of forgiveness? Will we look at what lies ahead through a lens of fear and scarcity? Or will we view our future with gratitude and excitement for what we can do now that this weight has been lifted? Will the power of forgiveness transform our lives - both as individuals and as a church - so that the bonds of what entrap us are broken, and we are set free to serve selflessly and abundantly in God's name? Will we start putting limits on acts of kindness and grace - "Is seven times enough, Lord?" Or will we live in the knowledge that because God has forgiven us so great a debt, we are called to forgive others - "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times?"

Thanks be to God for God's forgiveness granted to us in God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.