

*“The Unfairness of the Gospel: What’s Up with Forgiveness”*

A sermon preached by

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**Matthew 18:21-35**

*<sup>21</sup>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?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>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.’ <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

It isn’t easy being the daughter of a saint. That is the conclusion of Kate Hennessy in her book *“Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved By Beauty.”* Day, the pacifist, social justice campaigner, and founder of the Catholic Worker movement, is on track to be named a saint by the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has called her a “great American.” Kate’s mother Tamar was Day’s only daughter, and in the book Hennessy tells an intimate, sometimes painful story of her grandmother’s unflinching passion for the poor and hungry, a passion that often translated into a testy and difficult relationship between her mother and grandmother.

Dorothy was often not present during Tamar’s upbringing, making the rounds in public speaking and fund raising, so this left her daughter without her mother for weeks and months to be raised by other members of the Worker community. And even when Day was present, her socialist leanings meant that she didn’t care much about physical possessions, even her

daughter's, so she'd frequently give away Tamar's toys and clothing without her permission. The genius of the book, though, is how Hennessy tells these deeply painful and personal stories with a rare mix of candor, compassion, respect, and even genuine gratitude. At the end of the day, the book is suffused with the spirit of forgiveness and acceptance.

In the gospel this week, Peter asked Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" It's a loaded question when you remember that Peter denied ever knowing Jesus, and then also deserted him.

No doubt Peter was proud to appear so extraordinarily merciful as to forgive someone seven times. But Jesus exploded Peter's arithmetic of forgiveness. God's pardon, which we are called to imitate, far exceeds even our most exaggerated ideas about forgiveness.

What follows is this long, completely exaggerated story about a tyrannical king who is owed an astronomical amount of money. Jesus might as well have said, "A gazillion, billion dollars," in our context. I'd encourage you not to get caught up in the numbers or the calculations. Instead I think the story is told to help us see the magnitude and magnificence of God and it serves as an invitation to us to see this vision of God as a chance to participate in the wholeness of this grandeur.

But this vision of God, this commitment to reconciliation, isn't made known without a price, and often that price is in the midst of our wrestling match with forgiveness. Last year Bob Smietana wrote an article in the *Washington Post* about the families who were still struggling to forgive following the mass killings of nine African-Americans during a Bible study at their Charleston, South Carolina church.<sup>1</sup> Many of us remember Nadine Collier standing before the TV cameras after those killings and saying to the young white man who gunned down her mother, "I forgive you."

I remember preaching at the time that I was pretty sure I couldn't pronounce forgiveness in the way that she did, and I still don't think that I could. But what I've come to conclude is that Nadine's pronouncement is not a one and done kind of thing. Perhaps for many of the Emanuel families it is an aspirational goal, instead of a present reality. The Post article outlined several persons who were still struggling with anger, disappointment, and grief. But they kept saying, I know my faith tells me to forgive and I'm still working on that. Maybe it is a commitment to a

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Smietana, "A year later, families of the Charleston shooting victims still wrestle with forgiveness." *Washington Post*, June 17, 2016

process that often will take the rest of one's life to accomplish. When she told Dylan Roof, "I forgive you," Nadine still had to cope with the loss of her mother's voice in the house, the smile on her face as she greeted worshippers as an usher at Emanuel AME Church, the spring in her step when she led the procession for Communion. That pain does not go away. And in that sense, the pronouncement of forgiveness doesn't seek a cheap grace, but instead it resides in the reality that without the transforming power of God, we will be caught in the whirlwind of anger and despair.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive tenets of the Christian faith is a commitment to forgiveness. Each week most Christians gather to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is litany that seeks to form us, to imprint upon us a kind of spiritual DNA, that we know is not easy to accomplish, otherwise why would need we say it over and over again. And like Peter, we are tempted to seek a formula (how many times), a calculation, a transactional way of being that says if you give me X, I will give you Y. Otherwise there is this large risk that may put us in the position of offering ourselves, offering forgiveness and receiving absolutely nothing in return. That's what happens when a parent or partner, or a loved one or a boss or an adversary dies or leaves and we don't have a chance for resolution. Because you see, there is no calculus for that, no multiplication table, no magic formula.

Karoline Lewis wrote this week that often our resistance to forgive is rooted in our resistance to believe that we ourselves can be forgiven.<sup>2</sup> The final truth of this exchange between Peter and Jesus is that as much as we place controls over when and where and why we forgive others, we first do it to ourselves. Who could be more in need of forgiveness than Peter himself, who denies Jesus three times? And who among us could be more in need of forgiveness than ourselves...that is indeed where honest, faithful forgiveness begins.

At the end of her biography, Hennessy recalls how her mother Tamar, who suffered so much and for so many reasons, once told her, "You don't grow up until you forgive your parents." And we could add, your spouse, your children, your neighbor, your boss, and especially yourself.

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis, Forgiveness 101, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) September 13, 2017