

“The Trouble with Forgiveness”

Matthew 18: 21-35

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September 14, 2014

Have you ever had one of those moments where something you thought was true isn't actually true at all? Maybe it was something you thought was really good or wonderful and you find out later on that actually, it's not so wonderful. To give you an example, for me, one of those moments is the story of the first Thanksgiving. I remember learning the Thanksgiving story in school when I was young and thinking it was the greatest thing. These explorers showed up in America, looking for a new home, and there was a whole group of people just waiting to welcome them and to help them adjust and teach them how to survive here. Once they got to know each other, they had a huge feast that cemented their newfound friendship. As a kid, I thought, “Wow! What a great start to our country! I am so impressed that people could coexist peacefully.”

Since that was taught as the beginning of our country, and then we skipped over to the revolutionary war, I assumed that the relationship between the English and the Native Americans stayed close and harmonious. Then several years later, when I was too old to make feather headdresses out of construction paper, I learned that the original story I had heard was so, so wrong. That was not our history at all. I felt deceived. And even though I still love celebrating Thanksgiving—we've turned it into a different kind of celebration today—I always remember the first story I learned, and the real story, and those old feelings of shock and feeling duped come back. So, that is my memory of first learning that not everything you think is true or good is actually true or good. Maybe you share mine. Perhaps you have your own.

Unfortunately, the scripture passage from Matthew is another example of this way of “learning

the truth the hard way.” This parable on forgiveness is the ultimate story that is used to reference what Jesus says about forgiveness and how we are all called to live a life where we offer forgiveness freely to anyone who harms us or does wrong to us. As Christians, forgiveness is our *thing*. It's one of those core parts of who we are. We love our neighbors, we work for justice in the world, and we forgive people. And since forgiveness is so important, it makes sense that the part of the Gospels where Jesus tells us to forgive a person not seven times, but seventy-seven times, is frequently pointed to as a guiding passage for us.

But, just like the Thanksgiving story, there's a catch. There's more to that passage than just reminding us to forgive each other. And, it's not pretty. As it turns out, this is one of the most used and abused scripture passages today. It has been used to hurry people to forgiveness before they are ready. It has been used to justify bad behavior, pointing to the seventy-seven times as a reason why someone needs to just forgive and get over the offense, no matter how many times someone keeping committing it. This is a passage that causes anxiety and shame and worry in individuals, making them wonder if they aren't as good at forgiving as they should be, making them fear for what will happen to them in the eyes of God if they **can't** just *get over it* and move on.

This passage has a checkered history in our churches. One of the very real ways it is misused is in regards to intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence. There are stories of women and men who return to spouses that are abusive and homes that are not safe because they have been told they need to find forgiveness in their hearts. This specific passage has been used to tell these victims that God wants them to offer forgiveness and work it out. Actual people, well-meaning friends and family and even ministers, have taken this parable and used it to justify violence. That is not okay. That shocks me, and it makes me angry.

After I first learned this story is used in this way, I have never been able to look at this passage quite the same way. As a whole, as a country, we already don't do a great job of talking about domestic violence or supporting those women and men and children who are victims and survivors of it. That is

bad enough. It is worse when the shame and guilt that people feel is piled even higher when scripture is used against them to make them feel worse. Forgiveness is not meant to justify abuse or violence or any kind of offense that is committed. Forgiveness is not about allowing something horrible to keep happening because we think we are just supposed to forgive repeatedly. Forgiveness isn't about sweeping history under the rug. Forgiveness is complicated. It is messy. And it is definitely not meant to excuse any kind of abuse. I need to say this because it's important to hear: we are not a community where you will ever hear a message of shaming or guilt. This is not a place where abuse is hushed up for the sake of keeping the peace. This is a place where people can seek refuge, can find comfort and courage, and can find help. This is a place where anyone who has ever been abused physically, mentally, emotionally, or in any kind of way can find support and care. It's important that we all know that.

Forgiveness is a big part of who we are, but it is too complicated to fully explain in a word or a phrase or a parable or even a sermon. Forgiveness is a theme that occurs almost constantly in our life—at work, in family, in relationships, and even between strangers. Forgiveness comes into play in little moments like when your kid draws on their bedroom walls with their new markers and in big, awful ones like when a drunk driver costs someone their life. Forgiveness isn't usually as simple as forgiving and forgetting and moving on. Because forgiveness of all kinds, the big offenses and the little ones, involves people and pain, it gets messy really fast. It is hard for us to understand how to offer it, how to receive it, and how to live it. It is hard to know when it is right to begin that process, if we have to talk to someone directly to offer forgiveness, and or if it has been offered to us, how we know it is genuine or past resentments won't creep back up.

Last winter Dick and I co-taught a series on forgiveness. Each night the room was packed with members and friends of South Church. We all came with questions and stories of forgiveness from our lives. And then when we were done, instead of having nice neat answers, I think we all left with even more questions! And other people's stories reminded us of even more stories from our own lives! One of the things we could all agree on was that forgiveness is tricky because it looks different in different

situations and between different people. It manifests according to specific moments in time. It requires different reactions and interactions and self-reflections. It's not something that can be forced. It's not something that is always right or ready to give or receive. I think when Jesus said you have to forgive seventy seven times, he really understood that sometimes it takes seventy seven times to get forgiveness right! And that's for the easy things!

Some of the biggest questions and struggles with forgiveness are around those really big painful things that can happen in life. Things like heartbreak, or betrayal, or abandonment—those memories that fill us with anger and fear and sadness. There is no easy way to find forgiveness. It doesn't always come, and when it does, it might not look or feel like what you want it to or expect it to feel like.

This week I watched a new documentary about Matthew Shepard called *Matt Shepard Is A Friend of Mine*. It was made last year, on the fifteenth anniversary of his murder. The filmmaker was Matthew's friend growing up, and she made the documentary as a way of discovering where all of Matthew's family and friends were in the process of healing from his death—how they were finding meaning, seeking peace, and moving forward with their lives. She did a great job of capturing the lifelong struggle that many of his family and friends will go through in trying to find peace, and even forgiveness, for the men that took away Matthew's life.

For me, the most poignant part of the film was a discussion this woman had with the priest who had known both Matthew, and the two men, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, who killed him. In their discussion on forgiveness, she asked the priest, “Do you think there is good in their hearts?” He told her: “I believe this. There is more to Russell and Aaron than what happened that night. When you say 'is there good in their heart' I'm sure there is. Matthew is our brother, and so are Aaron and Russell, the two people who did this.”

Matthew's friend starts crying at this point and says she doesn't want to think of them as people with families of their own; she is too angry to think of them in any other way. The priest thinks for a moment and then agrees with her and adds, “I hope we are angry at what they did. It was awful.

Absolutely awful....” He said, “I hope you never lose being angry at this. Maybe for his friends, their most important mission is to remind the world to be angry at that. We must not ever heal from that.”

The priest offers up a beautiful theology of forgiveness. For him, forgiveness is seeing the whole person, but that doesn't mean justifying their actions. He leaves space for lingering anger and pain. Forgiveness is a both/and—you can understand it, and it can make you mad. You can recognize what led someone to hurt you, but you can still be angry that they hurt you. It doesn't have to be one or the other. It's not going to be neat or simple. You have to be where you are at—even if that is a place of anger or hurt. The priest reminds us that when something tragic happens, it can just be tragic. We don't have to minimize our feelings or experiences or pain in order to fit into a prescribed box about what we are told forgiveness looks like. There is more than one way to enact forgiveness. There is more than one way to heal.

I really wanted to preach a different sermon this morning—one about the joy of forgiving others and ourselves. But, I now know too much about how this scripture passage from Matthew has been used against innocent people. I know too much about our history of silence and shame in the church. It makes things complicated. It makes things messy. It would have been helpful if instead of just telling us to keep forgiving each other, Jesus could have expounded a little and talked about the nuances of forgiveness. He didn't do that, but there is still good news. The Good News is that there is room for the complicatedness of forgiveness, and the mess, and our confusion, and anger and pain. There is room to take care of yourself and your needs and seek safety without having to feel pressured to reconcile or find forgiveness in your heart. There is room for all of it. Because God is big enough to hold all of it, especially when it becomes too difficult to process or it reduces us to a puddle of tears like it did to Matthew's friend. One of the things I am most confident about in this world is that God understands that one size does not fit all. God made every single person and animal and organism on this planet different from the rest. That reminds me that not only do we all look different, but we love differently, we feel differently, and we forgive differently. It's hard work precisely because it is so individual and personal. No one can tell you

how to do it. No one can force you into it. Forgiveness is work that's between you and God, and no one can take that away from you.