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Introduction

How often should we forgive others? Do you ever feel maxed out, that forgiveness demands too much? Are there times where you feel that someone goes past the point of being offered forgiveness? These questions lie behind the very struggle that Peter brings to Jesus at the start of this week's passage.

I suspect that when Peter offered his suggestion of forgiving someone up to seven times, he felt that he was going above and beyond what anyone could possibly deserve (and certainly above the requirement of three times that was demanded under rabbinical law). Jesus' response must therefore have been somewhat of a shock for Peter. When he declares that forgiveness should be offered seventy-seven times (or what is often translated as seventy times seven)– what he's really asking for is forgiveness that is not counted, a forgiveness with no end. This sort of forgiveness demands so much more than an act that meets our own needs, or our own understandings of what's just and what's fair.

What would be your own honest answer to Peter's question? Bear that thought in mind while reading this text.

Text

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’

The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Comment

Throughout Matthew 18 Jesus has been building on the vision of the Kingdom of God laid out in the Sermon on the Mount. Each time this vision is explored, it counters and challenges our understanding of life under any earthly kingdom (or any earthly republic for that matter!) in teachings that would have been just as counter-cultural in the first century as they are today. From the start of this chapter the ‘little ones’ are described as the greatest in the Kingdom, and the parable of the lost sheep challenges prevailing wisdom and places the upmost importance on the lost little ones as opposed to just settling for the safety and security of the larger group. In the same way this passage presents a deep challenge to our natural instincts towards forgiveness. Jesus, in exploring the intersection of grace and mercy found in forgiveness, is modelling out a kingdom ‘economy’ where our relationships and interactions with others are turned on their heads.

Forgiveness can often be viewed as a simple and somewhat static concept, particularly within the confines of the church. It can be painted as either a simple act declaring forgiveness without recognition of the cost it demands or at times as

something that must simply be swallowed and endured, but this is often a way of avoiding really dealing with issues. The deep personal costs that forgiveness can demand is often less recognized. In this passage however Jesus' call for forgiveness is absolute, there are no preconditions, no limits, no opt out clauses. The deep challenge of Jesus' answer in this passage should be felt and recognized as having a huge personal cost. This challenge can resonate even deeper when we locate it in current on-going systems of injustice and inequality- be it in a personal or a wider context- that demand so much of those caught up in them. How do we recognise and reconcile Jesus' call with the huge personal cost of this unlimited forgiveness?

While working on the border between Thailand and Burma/Myanmar, I found myself with a group who had been forced to flee their homes and their land in the face of state sanctioned violence. While working with a group the question of forgiveness came up, one of the participants phrased their struggle with forgiveness by offering an analogy;

'Imagine your home is taken by force by burglars, the offenders have moved in and taken up residence. In the process, members of your family are injured and you are forced to live in one small room upstairs. Meanwhile they continue to live a comfortable life in your home, eating your food and occasionally harassing your family. How can you forgive when you are still being wronged, when there is no repentance and the systems of injustice endure?'

Similarly to Peter's question to Jesus I think this question was asked with an expectation of already knowing the answer. As I sit with this analogy I feel I can empathise with the shock Peter must have felt as he realized the huge cost of what Jesus was asking. It may not be on the same level as the state sanctioned violence mentioned in my story, but often we find ourselves in unequal power structures where we can be trapped, or find no recognition of our hurt and pain. Particularly in these cases of on-going injustice, with no end in sight, by forgiving especially where there is no recognition of wrong doing, it can feel like we are diminishing our own pain, or even forfeiting our claim to what is 'right'? Yet the deep challenge of this passage is that it unequivocally points towards forgiveness.

How then do we recognise and appreciate the real cost of forgiveness? I think implicit in what Jesus is saying at the beginning of this passage is a dynamic understanding of the nature of forgiveness. That forgiveness is often not about an instantaneous decision, or the immediate process of letting go of hurt and pain, rather that forgiveness requires us to be open to the process of continually deciding to lay something down, and then next time those feelings rear their head to do the exact same thing, over and over again. While it is undoubtedly a huge challenge, I find a bit of relief and freedom in this. Today I may be struggling to forgive, but it is part of a process and by continually searching for the ability to forgive, maybe I'll be further along tomorrow.

The final response of the King at the end of the passage is a stark reminder of the cost of not forgiving. Having forgiven the first servant so much, *his* unwillingness to show mercy to the other servant provokes the angriest of responses. This can seem like a challenge to the idea of unlimited forgiveness, or to put in another way that this example of forgiveness was in fact conditional on the subsequent behaviour of the servant. I would suggest that reading this passage in light of an understanding of nature of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus has been describing provides a different lens through which to view the end of this story. The kingdom is exemplified and modelled out through its upside-down values, that challenge our human instincts, but by searching to live out those values we are bringing some of that kingdom into being in our own lives.

Circling back to my group members story, I struggled to articulate an answer to his question, how could I tell this person who had suffered more than I could understand that really I believed he needed to forgive? I have to say I tried, not in the most eloquent way, to talk through my belief that forgiveness is often a necessary part of preventing the build up of bitterness and pain that we can become trapped in, that forgiveness is necessary for our own well-being. But also, fundamentally that I believed forgiveness to be at its core a defiant and almost revolutionary act, one that challenges and changes the world around us. If we are to see our lives, our communities, and our societies more closely resemble the kingdom Jesus describes, I think the scandalous act of forgiveness when the human response of unforgiveness is so justified, is a wonderful place to start.

Take some time to hear stories from people who have forgiven so much, particularly when it would have been understandable to hold back. Search out people in your own lives with whom to have these conversations, you could ask some of the following questions

- How they were able to come to a place of forgiveness?
- What was their motivation to forgive?
- What was the personal cost of forgiveness to themselves?
- What have the results of forgiveness been in their own lives?

You could also search out stories, from people who forgave from books or the internet. One great resource is the Forgiveness Project who have catalogued a huge varieties of stories from people across the world. You can find the stories at:

<http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>

Prayer

Father of Forgiveness,
who has forgiven us so much in order to bring us back into relationship with you,
Teach us to forgive.
Help us forgive even when the personal cost is huge, knowing we are always held in
your arms. But let us always push for an end to injustice, to challenge the systems
of oppression we find ourselves in
For you are the God of mercy, but also a lover of justice.
Amen.