“Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

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“Forgiveness isn’t an act, it’s an attitude.” This was Martin Luther King Jr’s take on the matter. He preached that forgiveness isn’t a matter of obligation or duty. One cannot go through the world trying to make sure forgiveness is a balanced ledger. That both parties square up when it comes to forgiving each other. King preached that we must turn forgiveness into an attitude. A way of life.

Our dear friend, the disciple Peter wants to turn forgiveness into an act that can be calculated and measured. He asks Jesus: “Lord, if somebody in the church sins against me, how often do I have to forgive him or her? Seven? Will that cover it? Am I off the hook if their offenses number greater than that?” Peter operates out of a very human understanding of justice. In his mind, seven is a reasonable limit on forgiveness. If someone hurts him more than that, then shame on them. They don’t deserve his mercy. He can just walk away from the relationship. Reconciliation only extends so far, Peter believes.

Jesus’ response is not exactly what Peter wants to hear. “Oh Peter,” Jesus sighs, “my answer is more than seven. You must forgive that person way more than that.”

The translation here is a little muddled because the Greek can either be read as 77 times or 70 times 7, equaling 490 moments of forgiveness. But to get caught up in what number Jesus actually means, puts us in the same spot as Peter. Turning it into a measureable act. Let’s not get caught up in the actual number Jesus offers. The point is, Jesus reveals that our willingness to forgive should be more abundant than our sense of justice. Jesus tells us to stop keeping a record of how many times we’ve forgiven one person. Instead our grace should extend beyond limit.

Our willingness to forgive should reflect God’s willingness to forgive.

As usual, Jesus offers a parable to help the disciples and us understand what he means.

He tells the story of a servant who struggles with forgiveness. First, we hear about his conflict with the king. The servant owes the king, big time. 10,000 talents was an unimaginable number. It would be impossible for the servant to repay the king in his lifetime. Upon threat of being sold and his family torn apart, the servant falls to his knees, begging for mercy. The king knows, the servant can’t repay the debt. And yet the king forgives him. He clears the ledger and forgives the servant of the debt as though it never existed in the first place.

You would think this act of forgiveness would have transformed the servant. That he would have seen the world in a new light. That receiving such tremendous grace would encourage him to have grace for others.

But what does he do next? He goes and finds a fellow servant who owes him money. Much less money than he owed the king. The money owed by the other servant is a reasonable number that could be repaid. But the forgiven servant doesn’t have mercy as he had been shown mercy. Instead he threatens his peer. He demands to be repaid. When the fellow servant begs for mercy – much like he did just moments before – the unforgiving servant refuses the plea. He throws the man in prison and doesn’t think twice about his hypocrisy.

The king is told about this and scolds the servant. Reminding him that he just received unimaginable grace and mercy. The king tells him he should have done likewise to his peer. We see that the servant failed to grasp the notion of forgiveness and grace. That once it is received it needs to be extended to others.

Parables can be challenging to understand. But the main thrust of this one is pretty clear. Jesus speaks of a king showing abundant grace and mercy, expecting the forgiven to do likewise to those who have hurt them.

So it is with forgiveness in God’s kingdom.

We confess our sin to God, anticipating forgiveness and pardon. We don’t really question it because we trust that God’s mercy is everlasting. But when it comes to forgiving our neighbors, we stumble. Like the servant in the parable, we forget that we’ve been forgiven a debt that would otherwise be impossible to reconcile. God’s grace is beyond anything we can comprehend. We ought to be empowered by that forgiveness to go and forgive those who have hurt us.

Yet this is one of our biggest struggles. We hold on to grudges and resent those who have hurt us. We hang on to those wrongs and hold them over the heads of our offenders. We get stuck and refuse to forgive.

I recently read a profound example of forgiveness in Amy Poehler’s autobiography. Poehler is known as one of the funniest women in Hollywood. She stars in Parks and Recreation, has co-hosted the Golden Globes with Tina Fey and has stared in a few movies. But what launched her career was her time as a Saturday Night Live comedian.

In her autobiography, Poehler devotes an entire chapter to a situation with a sketch she did on air. It is the only sketch she regrets doing, which is saying a lot since most of Saturday Night Live’s comedy comes at the expense of making fun of people.

Poehler describes the sketch that involved a doll named Hurricane Mary. This particular doll was disabled and the sketch took advantage of a disability in an attempt to turn it into comedy. Poehler remembers feeling uneasy when handed the script and the doll. She said she didn’t feel quite right about it, but in the rush of live TV, she didn’t have time to question it. The sketch aired, and the jokes went too far. She made fun of disabled people in a rather offensive way.

A few weeks later, Poehler received a letter from Chris Cooper, a fellow celebrity. The letter berated Poehler for doing such an offensive sketch, revealing that Hurricane Mary is not a fictional character. Rather she is based on a real girl named Anastasia who has cerebral palsy. The letter had a very harsh tone and demanded that Poehler apologize to Anastasia and to the disabled community.

Well Poehler’s first reaction was that she didn’t need to apologize. She didn’t know that Hurricane Mary was based on a real girl, so she didn’t think she did anything wrong. She shifted the blame to the writers who created the sketch, letting herself off the hook. Poehler got angry at the letter. She got defensive. She tore up the letter and decided she would not respond to it.

As she writes about this situation, she reflects on how she didn’t want to admit she had been wrong. She didn’t want to face the fact that she had made a mistake. She still wanted to make excuses.

Yet she realized that she was the face of the joke, the one who delivered it on screen. Over time she realized she was wrong. Her guilt started to eat away at her. It got to the point where she would get anxious going to events in Hollywood, for fear that she would run into Chris Cooper, the one who pointed out her wrongdoing. For years she had this internal torment that would not go away. She was still too proud to apologize, but she was realizing how much she needed to.

She finally connected with a mutual friend who got her in touch with Cooper and Anastasia. Poehler finally brought herself to apologize for the sketch and for not responding to the letter, an offense that added to the first. In her apology, she explained her experience of the situation – not to make excuses – but to sincerely explain why it took her so long to apologize. She stated that she did not expect to be forgiven. She did not think she deserved it after such a long time of avoiding an apology.

Poehler received a letter from Anastasia, the girl who was the victim of the cruel joke made on TV. It was a letter of total and complete mercy. Anastasia stated she forgave Poehler in full and thanked her for the authentic apology.

Poehler’s reaction to Anastasia’s forgiveness is profound. She calls it an act of grace and a gift. A glorious release. The guilt and the shame that had imprisoned her for years was finally lifted. After years of fearing what would happen if she apologized. After not wanting to admit that she was wrong, she experienced this incredible and surprising act of grace from the person she hurt. Poehler walked away from the experience with a new understanding of forgiveness and a changed perspective when it comes to those who have hurt her.

It took an experience of extreme grace for her to see that.

As Christians, we experience extreme grace every time confess our sins to God. We encounter God’s mercy and love through our pleas for forgiveness, and then regardless of how big the offense is, we are forgiven. We are given a taste of endless, abundant forgiveness.

And we are called to show that endless, abundant forgiveness to others. Forgiving them of their debts, just as God has forgiven ours. If we refuse to forgive, it’s as though we are negating the forgiveness we’ve received by God. We make a mockery of what God has done for us.

But to forgive others, means living into the grace God has given us.

What we find as a result is reconciliation and restoration. We let go of the resentments we harbor toward one another, and move forward in grace. It’s a win-win for both parties involved. Healing is made possible. The burden of guilt is release. Everyone benefits.

When we take on this radical attitude of forgiveness, we inch closer and closer to what God desires for the world. A world full of grace and mercy. A world where forgiveness is an attitude, a way of being. An automatic response to a plea for mercy.

This is what grace looks like. This is what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

May we keep working toward this with every opportunity to forgive each other.

Let us pray.