

Measuring Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35
September 13, 2020
First Presbyterian Church, Luling

When Andy and I were engaged, the summer just before we got married, he had moved into the seminary apartment that would become our first home together. I was still camped out in the dorm, but he had brought the dog to help him with summer Greek class and had convinced the business office that he was entitled to move into the apartment early. I was there frequently, of course, and noted several things that needed to happen before we settled in together.

One of the things that needed help was the bathroom. It was a tiny little thing, but that wasn't the problem—we actually ended up with a smaller bathroom in another house later on. Its major flaw was that it had not one single cabinet or drawer in the whole room. The sink was bolted to the wall, and there was a windowsill and a soap dish in the bathtub, but those were the only horizontal surfaces to be found.

So, being energetic young people, we took off for Home Depot and found a cabinet that would fit above the toilet. After we got it home and put together, we had to go back to Home Depot, of course, because the walls in our post-World War II apartment were made of plaster, which required a special drill bit and special screws. We were finally ready to hang the thing. Andy got the drill and started to drill holes in the wall. It didn't line up with the holes in the cabinet. He tried again. Same thing. I asked, quite helpfully, I'm sure, if he had measured it? Yes, he replied, and proceeded to show me. He measured the distance between the holes in the cabinet. Then he went in the bathroom and drilled some more holes. He took the measuring tape into the bathroom and measured between two holes he had drilled. I finally figured out that he wasn't measuring from anywhere in particular, like the edge of the cabinet or the corner of the bathroom. That building is no longer standing, so our holey plaster behind the bathroom cabinet was probably not ever discovered.

There are lots of situations when we need to measure carefully. It is a skill that we begin to learn as soon as we can count. How many fingers do you have? That's a measurement. How many Christmas presents did she get, and how many did I get? Those are measurement too.

Apparently humans are a measuring kind of species. Because when we measure, we have a way to compare—bigger, more, shorter, longer, fewer. It's an objective way for us to determine whether something is adequate or not.

And so we have some sympathy with Peter's question. How many times are we to forgive? As many as seven times? Which was already more than the three times the rabbis required. And Jesus answered seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven. What Jesus meant is "more times than you want to. More times than you think you can. More times than seem humanly possible."

I do want to point out that forgiving is not the same as letting yourself be beat up, metaphorically or literally, over and over again. Forgiveness is more about the state of your own heart than the behavior of the other person. To forgive another person when that person has hurt you means that the relationship between you is important enough to you to preserve, to reconcile, to maintain. But if the other person is not interested in reconciliation, forgiveness is still required, for the sake of your own heart. And not just once, not twice, but more times than you want to have to work on it. Forgiveness is hard work, and it's enormous, too big to be measured.

Then Jesus tells the parable to illustrate what he means. The first servant owes the king a lot of money. I mean a lot. Let's say the servant earns \$10 a day. He owes the king almost 4 million dollars. A sum that would have been impossible to pay back, certainly, if not impossible to amass in the first place. It's huge. The king is ready to sell him, his family, and all their possessions to pay off the debt. The

servant implausibly promises to get the money to the king, and begs for more time. Time is not going to pay off that debt. It's way too big.

The king has mercy on him and forgives this enormous debt. The first servant has been forgiven, his debt has been measured with mercy instead of justice, but he doesn't get it. We know he doesn't get it because of what happens next. A fellow servant owes this first servant money. Say this servant also makes \$10 a day. The second servant owes the first servant about \$1000. Which isn't anything to sneeze at, but it's no 4 million dollars. The first servant refuses to forgive this small debt from the other servant and has him thrown in prison.

The king, initially, and the first servant, are measuring, just like kids do with the Christmas presents. This is a huge debt, and only a huge repayment will forgive this debt. The first servant never gets beyond this kind of measuring, where only a dollar-for-dollar repayment can forgive a debt. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, I'm keeping a record of every dime I've given you, and I'm not forgetting. I'm remembering every time you ignored me or insulted me or didn't compliment me, and I won't ever forget. Ever. You'll have to bend over backward in order to earn my forgiveness.

I guess we're all like that first servant sometimes, wanting to keep an exact account of everything someone has done wrong to us. And if we offer forgiveness, it's stingy, and measured by those same terms. We forgive if the person meets certain conditions or says they're sorry or repents. And then we only offer as little forgiveness as we can get by with.

The king ends up measuring debt and forgiveness in a far different way, with the measurement of divine mercy. In order to forgive a debt that large, you have to disregard how big it is, just stop measuring it at all. It's a debt, and it needs forgiving. Period. That's how mercy measures. And, in mercy, he forgives the debt of the first servant. It's so big as to be incomprehensible, that debt. And also the forgiveness. So big as to be incomprehensible.

Well, yes. That's how big God's forgiveness has to be, because the human condition of sinfulness is also so big as to be incomprehensible. We are the recipients of that grace, divine grace, that mercy, that divine forgiveness. God does not measure things the same way we do, thankfully. As the Psalmist reminds us, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?"

If it were up to us on our own, I don't think human beings would be much inclined toward forgiveness, nor very good at it. Our forgiveness, what we can offer to another person, is rooted in the forgiveness that we have received first from God. God's forgiveness transforms our hearts, and enables us, shows us the way, to forgive other people. Seven times, seventy seven times, seventy times seven times, more times than we want to. Only as recipients of divine mercy can we measure forgiveness in this way. Or, maybe to say it better, we will stop measuring forgiveness at all.