

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 5:1-8; Luke 7:36-8:3

Jesus was always an interesting dinner guest. There are a lot of stories in the gospels about what happened when he attended a dinner party. Luke describes seven dinner stories including the last supper and two resurrection appearances that included a meal. Most of the other dinner stories that Luke describes were in the home of Pharisees. The story today is one of those.

It took place in the home of Simon, a Pharisee who invited not only Jesus but also some other guests to eat with him at home. While they were finishing the first course, a woman came in from the street, which is odd enough in and of itself. But we know that the Salahis at the White House were not the first party crashers in history, nor was this woman either. She moved quickly to Jesus and started giving him a kind of impromptu pedi soak with her tears. And then she took down her hair and shook it out in a rather seductive way, so that everybody at the table had to take another gulp of wine, and with every eyebrow raised and every head bowed in self consciousness she kissed Jesus feet and wiped her tears with her hair.

Now this was not an every meal occurrence for Simon, and I dare say not for Jesus either, although I think he handled the affair with more ease than I ever would. Simon thought to himself that if Jesus were a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this was. In other words, prophets have special prescient knowledge that mere mortals do not. And it puzzled Simon both that Jesus was not more concerned for his reputation, as well as his own ritual purity as a holy man.

As it turned out, Jesus had more than a prophet's understanding of this woman as well as knowledge of her, and a better understanding than did Simon. Jesus used the occasion as a teaching moment about the issue of forgiveness.

He told Simon a parable about two debtors, one who owed a man two years wages, and another who owed a man two months wages. Neither of them were able to pay the debt. But the lender cancelled the debts (he must have had some federal backing). Whatever the reason, the debt was forgiven. "So," Jesus asked Simon, "which of the two do you suppose will love him more?"

Simon said, "The one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said, "You have judged rightly."

Then Jesus pointed out to Simon the fact that even though he was a guest, Simon had not offered to wash his feet, a common expression of hospitality. Simon had not embraced Jesus upon his arrival. And none of the affection or grace that the woman had expressed so effusively was there in any measure from the Pharisee.

At which point, Jesus iced the situation by turning to the woman and saying to her that her sins were forgiven. The guests at the table began to buzz about who Jesus thought he was to forgive sins in the way that only God can forgive, which only illustrated more precisely the point of Jesus' parable, that those who are forgiven the greater debt are usually the ones who are most grateful.

All of which brings me to the issue of forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of those issues in life that we all have to face and about which we are almost all of two minds. When it comes to the forgiveness of our own transgressions, whatever few we can bring to mind, we are hoping, no, we *expect*, that there is abundant and copious grace overflowing. In fact, we would be quite surprised if all of our *errata* in life were not able to be expunged from the record.

On the other hand, when it comes to forgiving *others*, the abundant grace does not exactly flow over in quite the same way. We are judicious in our parceling of forgiveness when we are the offended party. And we tend to parse the difference between forgiving and forgetting what those who have transgressed against us have done.

Ironically, every week we pray in worship, as a part of the Lord's Prayer, the words, *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. In other words, we are praying, "...in the same measure as we have forgiven others, so forgive us, O God." The problem is that we are fickle in our forgiveness. We tend to hold grudges and seek revenge. We take retribution and even the scores. We relish *schadenfreude*, the secret delight in the misfortune of others. If our own forgiveness depends on our ability to forgive, then we are on shaky ground. It is really God's forgiveness that we need to mimic, because God's forgiveness is complete, whereas ours claims reservations.

Sometimes, of course, there really is forgiveness. There really is. A few years ago,¹ Pope John Paul II when he was living met Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who had tried to assassinate him. John Paul met Agca in prison and shook his hand, the same hand that had squeezed a trigger and tried to kill him. The pope whispered words of forgiveness when they met while a stunned and disbelieving world looked on. Sometimes there really is forgiveness, forgiveness that exceeds what most of us can muster.

I have been in contact with a number of people this past week discussing the Presbyterian Church's approaching General Assembly, working on the Middle East Study Committee's report on Israel-Palestine. Now there (the issues that relate to Israel and Palestine) is a place where little is forgiven, and nothing has ever been forgotten. Sometimes there is a cease fire, or a negotiated settlement, even a peace treaty, as there was with the Camp David Accords in 1978 and '79 between Egypt and Israel. But forgiveness? Not much real forgiveness to measure there, not yet, not after all these years.

A year or so ago, I read a book about an incident involving a falsely accused man. The book was entitled, **Picking Cotton**. It's the true story of Jennifer Thompson-

Cannino and Ronald Cotton. Jennifer was raped at knifepoint in 1984 by a man that she identified in a line up, in North Carolina, a man whom she came to know as Ronald Cotton. He served eleven years on a double concurrent life sentence before being exonerated by DNA evidence. Jennifer had mistaken him in the lineup for another man, and certain as she was that he was the perpetrator of her crime, she was wrong.

After Cotton's release from prison, Jennifer feared facing him, for obvious reasons, but after two years she summoned the courage to describe what it was like to face the man she had falsely accused. She writes,

I said Ronald, "If I spent every second of every minute of every hour or every day for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to how sorry I am. How I feel in my heart."

And Ronald said,

I forgive you. I've never hated you and I want you to be happy.²

The two of them now speak publicly together against the death penalty and for judicial reform, because there was a time when Ronald as a Black man might have been put to death for the crime of which he was convicted.

So forgiveness happens sometimes, but it is often mixed with guilt and remorse and sadness, and even when forgiveness happens we don't always forget. We can't forget the wrongs that were done to us.

This is perhaps most obvious and most poignant when it comes to infidelity in a relationship, in a marriage. Trust is broken and it takes a long time for that trust to be rebuilt. Sometimes it just doesn't get repaired. There is always a crack in the teacup that shows where the glue was applied to make it whole again. It can hold together, but there is always the repair that shows.

What prevents reconciliation and forgiveness in such a case? Someone who has been through it has written:

If forgiveness is to happen, husband and wife must put aside the need for power - the power of being the one who is "right," the power to punish the other for pain inflicted, the power of revenge for harm that has been spoken and done. They must renounce power and assume vulnerability and weakness for the sake of reconciliation, and this is very hard to do. It goes against almost every human instinct, every emotional impulse. Forgiveness is rare because it is very hard to do.³

But forgiveness is more than just hard to do, this side of heaven it's impossible to do.

Again the words of another who knows of what he speaks,

Part of the reality of human life is that each of us has been harmed by other people and has also inflicted harm upon others. Whether this

harm is of the sort that gets discussed on the talk shows - such as child abuse, alcoholism, or domestic violence - or whether it is of the more silent and subtle forms, the fact is that our relationships are not whole. This is what it means to be a sinner; this is what it means to be human. Moreover, these slashes in human relationships are not superficial wounds; the damage runs deep.

... ask the wronged persons to be civil to the offenders and perhaps it can be done. Ask them to be kind, and maybe they can muster that up as well. Ask them even not to repay evil for evil, not to exact revenge for their wrongs, and that can at times be achieved. But do not ask them to forgive. Do not ask them to completely heal the relationship, to withdraw all of the painful memory and to extract any lingering poison. Civility is within our grasp; but forgiveness, true, deep-down, New Testament forgiveness, is not a human possibility.⁴

This is why our standard for forgiveness of our own sins cannot be our own spotty record in forgiving others. With apologies to Jesus, the goal must be higher. We must take as our model what God has done for us.

Ephesians urges us to “Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” And that is what we are called to live out, because that is what we have already received in Christ, true, deep down, thoroughgoing forgiveness. We are meant to draw as close to that destination as we can. We always live, after all, with one foot in heaven and one on earth. Moving toward that place where God is all in all and justice is done, and forgiveness is complete.

That is I suppose how Pope John Paul was able to forgive the man who tried to take his life. It was a peace and a forgiveness that was more than his own. He offered to Ali Agca the hand of forgiveness offering the peace of Christ, a greater peace than dwells on earth, a dawning grace that bears with it heaven’s grace.

Real forgiveness takes time, and some of our forgiveness will take more time than we have. It will take God’s time. But that’s all right, because God has the time. God has the time to make right all the world’s wrongs, to heal all the world’s brokenness, and to restore all that has been shattered.

Tom Long, professor of preaching at Emory University, writing on the challenge of forgiveness, tells a story about someone that he knew.

I heard once about a pastor of an inner city church who had planned a relaxed evening with his wife at a nice restaurant to celebrate her birthday [Long writes]. They met at the church at the end of the day and headed out the door to the parking lot. However, just outside the church they encountered a crisis in progress. An elderly man and his wife had been walking by the church, and the man had evidently suffered a heart attack. He was lying on the sidewalk and his wife was bending over

him, frightened and desperate. The minister rushed over to the man while the minister's wife ran back inside the church to call for an ambulance. The pastor loosened the man's shirt, reached out for his hand, and said, "Try to relax. We're right here with you and an ambulance is on the way."

To the pastor's surprise and puzzlement, the man looked up at him and said, "Forgive me, Charlie."

The pastor did not learn until later that Charlie was the man's son and that father and son had been estranged for many years. The pastor squeezed the man's hand reassuringly and said, "I am not Charlie. My name is Sam. I'm a minister and I'll stay here with you until help comes. Don't be afraid."

But the man responded in an urgent voice, "Charlie, please. Forgive me."

"I'm not Charlie," repeated the pastor. "Stay calm now, and we'll get you to a hospital soon."

Abruptly the man's breathing changed and his face turned ashen. It was becoming apparent that his condition was very grave and that he would not make it to the hospital. He whispered, "Charlie, I'm begging you. Please forgive me."

It was now clear to the pastor what he must do. He embraced the dying man and said, "I forgive you. I forgive you." A look in the man's eyes signaled that he had heard these words. Then his breathing stopped, and he was gone.

The next day the pastor wondered and worried about what had happened. What right had he to speak a word of forgiveness on behalf of the man's son? The son was not there; father and son were still estranged. What right had he, a stranger, to speak words of forgiveness when the brokenness was still ongoing, when father and son were not reconciled?

Gradually it came to him that his entire ministry, indeed all of the Christian life, is this way. We are always living God's future in a broken present, the gospel is always a word of reconciliation from God's future spoken ahead of its time.

As for the past, God knows and remembers our sin.

As for the future, God remembers our sin as forgiven.

As for the present, "Forgive one another... as God in Christ has forgiven you."⁵

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¹ The meeting took place on January 9, 1984. The assassination attempt was on May 13, 1981.

² Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton. **Picking Cotton**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009. 280.

³ Thomas G. Long, "To Err is Human; to Forgive ...?" in *Forgiveness, Christian Reflection* (Fall 2001): 29-35. Copyright © 2001 by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.