

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**October 9, 2022**  
**Matthew 18:15–35**

Let us pray for the presence of God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his

slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Today we welcomed new members, which is always a joyous occasion in the life of the church. When new members meet in an information session about joining the church, or when they meet with Session before joining, some time is usually spent together talking about what it means to be church, and why they want to join a particular congregation. Often, as part of that conversation, I ask them to share what they like about Oak Grove and what has led them to make the decision to join the church as a member of the congregation. The conversation is informative, and typically also positive and uplifting.

It has been my practice as a pastor for a number of years, following the example of another pastor, for all the churches I have served to also to remember to say to these new members that at the moment they really like the church. That we look bright and shiny. We are new. And I also say, at some point, if you are part of the congregation long enough the church will make you upset. You will get mad. Someone will disappoint or offend you. Knowing this will happen, I then ask the new members to try and commit to sticking together. To have open and honest conversations with those with whom they are upset. To let us know when they have been disappointed, and to commit to working through the conflict or offense.

“Where two or three are gathered,” Jesus says, “God will be with them.” But I think maybe we could say, “Where two or three are gathered... well, it can be messy.” The church is a human construct, that is, it is comprised of humans; messy, imperfect, humans.

The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*. Before it was used to mean church, it was a word that was used to describe politics, or the work done in the public square. It was the name of the public assembly that came together to vote for the leaders of the community. Originally, *ecclesia*, described a group of people coming together to work for the common good. That is the original meaning of politics. With that original meaning in mind, I think it was quite intentional for the early church to adopt the word *ecclesia* to describe itself. It’s about the people and it’s about that group of people coming together to work together for the common good for all.

And, because it is people, it’s messy. Notice Jesus doesn’t say, “if you have an argument,” he says, “when.” I think there is sometimes a false narrative about church and church people that assumes we should

always be nice, and by nice, people mean that there shouldn't be any conflict. But we know that isn't true.

There is an old joke about a man being rescued from a deserted island. When the people get there to rescue him after years of being stranded, they notice there are three buildings on the island. The rescuers ask the man what the buildings are. He says, "That one is my house. The middle one is my church. The other one is the church I used to go to." Conflict happens in the church and Jesus knows this. How we respond to conflict and harm is important.

After Jesus talks about what to do when conflict and harm happen within the church community, we get a long discourse and a parable about forgiveness when Peter asks a question. This conversation about forgiveness is given in the context of church discipline and community practices – about how we live our life together. It's not about punishing people, it's about restoration of relationship and accountability.

Every week we say the Lord's Prayer together and we ask to be forgiven as we forgive others, or as many of us also understand it, that we ask to be able to forgive as we have been forgiven. The story that Jesus tells about the servant who is forgiven by the king but then in turn is unable to forgive a fellow servant a much smaller debt is one of those parables that doesn't need a lot of explanation.

The parable that Jesus tells comes on the heels of Peter asking Jesus the question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" I think Peter thinks that he is doing really well.

You can hear the conversation a little after Jesus has taught them what to do if someone has wronged you. Peter, maybe wanting to impress Jesus, goes the extra step. He is going to show off a little bit, aim for a high

number, he says to Jesus, “So, Jesus, how many times should we forgive? Like, seven?”

Jesus just smiles, and points his finger in the air.

Peter replies, “Oh, ok, like 12?”

Jesus, again with the finger...

“Oh,” Peter tries again, “like 27?”

Again, the finger

“37?”

The finger...

“Well, how many?” Peter exclaims.

Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven.” Or, as some translations have it, “seven times seventy!”

Peter was nowhere near high enough – and he was asking the wrong question to begin with.

Jesus goes on to tell the story of the servant in debt to the king. The servant owed the king 10,000 talents. In one of the translations I read, it said 10,000 bags of gold. It could have easily been translated as a gazillion dollars. It’s a lot. A talent is about 130 pounds of silver, which at the time was equal to about 15 years of a laborer’s wages. Which meant that this servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labor. There is no way that this person could ever pay the king back. It was impossible. It was never going to happen in either one of their lifetimes. And yet the king, without any explanation, after being begged by the servant to show him mercy, does exactly that and forgives the enormous debt.

The first servant then leaves and sees a fellow servant, someone his equal who owes him money. The servant who has been forgiven demands the debt, much smaller in comparison to the debt that has been forgiven, and when the servant who owes the money begs for some mercy, the servant who had been the recipient of a much greater mercy, shows none and has the other servant thrown into jail.

Everyone who hears this story, everyone, just cannot fathom or understand the forgiven servant's actions. How could he possibly not have remembered the great mercy he himself had received? How is he not compelled to show that same mercy for a much smaller debt?

But we like to keep track, don't we? We like to know what is due, and what is coming our way. It's even where Peter starts. He starts with counting and keeping track. "How many times, seven?"

After Jesus has talked about how to handle conflict and those that have wronged you, Peter starts with a number. Peter wants to know the limits of how to forgive. He needs to know what is expected of him, what's a reasonable amount of forgiveness? In my imagined conversation, each time Peter increases the limit, Jesus says to go even further. Peter starts with a number that he thinks is sufficient, and when you think about it, it's a pretty high number. Seven times, he suggests. That's a pretty big threshold to forgive someone over and over again. But Jesus goes even higher. Perhaps Jesus would like us to get out of the counting game altogether?

The parable is pretty clear that forgiveness is a way of life for someone that follows him. If we live in perspective to what God has done for us, and the magnitude of that, then we probably should stop counting. Jesus is talking about forgiveness, and, I imagine, like Peter, we get caught up in wondering just how much is enough? The very premise of Peter's question misses the mark altogether.

Now, I want to interject here, and I want you to listen to me carefully, because there has been a lot of harm done by the Christian church on the topic of forgiveness. And there is a need to keep track, or to count transgressions, in a sense. If someone is hurtful, or violent, it can be absolutely imperative that there be some distance put between you and that other person, that a relationship not continue any longer.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Hear that again, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Reconciliation may come because of forgiveness, but it may not. Wholeness and a repaired relationship may not be possible, particularly if the one doing the harm continues to do the harm or refuses to be accountable.

It's complex. Forgiveness isn't a bumper sticker theology. Yes, Jesus calls us toward a life of forgiveness, into relationships that are marked by reconciliation and peace, but we are not called to remain in hurtful or abusive situations. Nowhere does my faith tell me that victims of such violence must continue to put themselves in harm's way. We may continue to love someone who is abusive, and we may eventually forgive that person, but that does not mean that we have to put up with that abusive behavior. Again, forgiveness doesn't mean restoration of relationship.

It does become very important for us to think about what forgiveness is, and what it might look like. One article I read quoted a teacher that defined forgiveness this way, "Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed."<sup>i</sup> "Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed." I found that definition very helpful for me.

Forgiveness is hard work. And it doesn't always come easy. God interrupts our score keeping, cause-and-effect world and tells us that things don't have to be this way. And gives us the church to be a place where we get to practice this forgiveness.

The parable ends in an ominous way, a disturbing way. The king hands the original servant over to be tortured until the debt is paid – which we have already established is unattainable – it’s impossible. And then Jesus gives the warning that anyone who follows him and doesn’t live a life of forgiveness will have the same fate. Ooof... There are no second chances, let alone a seventh or seventy-seventh chance. I think it’s an indication of just how seriously God believes in forgiveness. It’s similar to the warnings from last week about putting stumbling blocks in front of the little ones. How we treat people, especially the most vulnerable is important to God. Forgiveness is serious business.

We like to identify with people in the parable, and we most like to associate ourselves with the good guys. But I’m not really sure who the good guy is in this parable. Sometimes we want to identify where God is in the story as well, and often the person in the highest position is God, but God certainly can’t be the king of no-second-chances in this story. God cannot be that ruler that takes back the unmerited forgiveness.

Forgiveness from God is good news. Is a gift of grace. And when we remember that, we can move from a fear of punishment to a call of reconciliation. Again, this story is set in the framework of learning to love one another well, a framework of working toward wholeness.

Perhaps the end of this story tells us if we live with the inability to forgive, whether that be someone else or ourselves, that is the life of torture. If we cannot recognize the amazing grace of God, and then live into that grace and forgiveness, perhaps that is when we are handed over to a tortuous life. When we understand forgiveness is a gift, and not primarily God’s expectation, we can then find ourselves more able to be merciful and forgiving.

Maybe there will continue to be those times when we will wonder if God's forgiveness, grace, and mercy are somehow conditional, somehow dependent on our actions. In those moments, I invite us to live into and trust that forgiveness is possible. More times than we can count. When we are able to recognize the gift of grace and forgiveness given to us, that we have already received, we can then figure out how to live more and more into being forgiving. We truly live into being a forgiven people when we, in turn, are forgiving. And the fun part is, wherever two or three are gathered, we will get plenty of practice. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3322>