

### **September 13, 2020 Pastor Carolyn Staats**

Jesus tells some stories that seem pretty weird to us. The talk of slaves and kings and slaveholders in our Gospel story today can be incredibly, understandably upsetting for us. But in this parable, along with many others, Jesus illustrates points about what the kingdom of heaven is like using a metaphor that would have made sense to the people around him back in the time that He was alive. Just as our metaphors nowadays would not make sense to folks in other generations, the cultural and historical context in which stories are written is crucial in truly understanding them.

So let's look at what the story, this parable of Jesus, tells us. What's at the root of the metaphor? We start with a king who is trying to settle his accounts with a slave who apparently owed him quite a bit of money. Kings, of course, had wealth and money and power and access to the greatest and best things possible. The slave, on the other hand, was someone without much to give at all - owned by another person, and occupied basically the lowest stance in the social hierarchy of the day. The king, who in this part of the parable, is like the kingdom of heaven, is generous, as he forgives the slave's debt and sends him on his way. As we learn later, when it came to forgiving (or not forgiving) debts, this could have gotten a lot worse and a lot more violent very quickly, but instead, the king chooses forgiveness of the debt, seeing as the slave could not pay it. He is merciful, as God is merciful with us, in forgiving.

But then the slave who was sent on his way came across another fellow slave. This second slave owed the first money, a significantly smaller amount than what was owed to the king. But instead of showing mercy to his fellow person, instead of forgiving, like he was forgiven, he insisted his fellow person be thrown into jail. No wonder the people around him were upset! As if being a slave, especially in this society wasn't absolutely dehumanizing and difficult and heartbreaking and challenging enough, condemning your fellow person in the shadow of your own forgiveness is not a great thing. Once the king found out about this, he was upset too, and then we hear his ending words of anger and torment. This is tough and life-threatening stuff on a few different levels. Jesus' warning for us at the end is extremely serious about the importance of forgiveness.

So what does this violent, complicated, troubling story teach us? What could we possibly gain from something so foreign and challenging and heartbreaking? We learn that forgiveness is an act of generosity. Forgiveness is a type of spiritual healing. And that healing through being generous with one another is what God desires for us in the kingdom of heaven.

Forgiveness is a form of spiritual healing because forgiveness impacts the person doing the forgiving in a huge way, perhaps even more than the one who is forgiven. Forgiveness is a reconciling we have to do within ourselves for the sake of the other. We heal by releasing the pain and tension that holds us captive. Forgiveness is the way we find that release, when we give that burden and that pain to God who is greater than anything that threatens and hurts us. We find freedom through the release of the power that wrongdoing has over us. Though it may be hard to remember sometimes, through God all things are truly possible. It is only through the strength and grace and power we are given by the Holy Spirit moving within us that we have the ability to forgive.

We know forgiveness and we are able to forgive because God first was gracious and merciful and forgave all of our shortcomings and wrongdoings and sins through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' death on the cross, the power of sin and death and all the other things that

threaten to separate us from God's healing love was overcome. Through God's unending love and God's promises to us to bring new and everlasting life to us, Jesus rose again and indeed defeated death which has no power over us anymore. God is generous beyond our knowing towards us, and through God's actions we receive love that truly never ends. Not even death separates us from this generous, healing love of God.

Forgiveness is also an act of generosity because it requires the devotion of our hearts, minds, time, and spirits in order for it to happen. Forgiveness requires us to name the wrongdoing and invest part of ourselves into that healing. When someone has wronged us, we have to think and pray and contemplate give something of ourselves to make things right within ourselves and within the relationship where things went wrong. Giving something of ourselves for the sake of someone who wronged us is absolutely both counterintuitive and countercultural. But so is faith, in many ways. And so hope can be too. Forgiveness requires you to be in relationship rather than be right. Relationships are a two-way street, and being right only really serves you. If we are loving and serving God and neighbors in all we do, then we must consider the relationships, with God and one another, in order to heal through forgiveness. Forgiveness requires us to be empathetic and go beyond ourselves for the sake of the other. Forgiveness is a very real way that we love our neighbors, even when it's really hard.

And though forgiveness is a generous act, and leads to a spiritual healing, forgiveness is also super messy. Forgiveness is such a human thing, getting down into the murky, squishy depths of hearts and spirits and feelings and ethics and all these kinds of complicated parts of ourselves, and yet it is where true healing and true love and true life grows from. We must not fear these most human parts of ourselves.

Because we are human, we are not perfect. We are not always able to forgive one another, on this deep level. Sometimes it takes us quite a while to come to a place of forgiveness. And because sin is real in our world, people fall into that and can commit heinous and absolutely unforgivable things towards one another, intentionally or unintentionally. Our call to forgiveness is not also a call to ignore or diminish what is unforgivable. But our call to forgiveness is to not let ourselves be defined by the wrongdoing that is done to us. Our future does not need to be held captive by the wrongdoing of others. Unforgivable acts are not a reason to shy away from living fully into the life that we are given. Where there is life, there is hope, and as long as we are alive we have the promises of hope and new life in Jesus Christ to guide us beyond the wrongdoings of others.

It is important to acknowledge the reality of what has happened that is unforgivable. Healing on any level begins first with naming what is wrong and what needs tending. For any trauma we experience, any terrible thing that happens to us or our loved ones cannot be brought to light if we keep it hidden in the dark. The ability to keep going through the pain of what is unforgivable, the depth of spiritual and mental strength that requires, is the depth to which Jesus goes to meet us in our pain and by the power of the Holy Spirit help us to move forth into healing and light. Jesus knew what it was to be betrayed and beaten and belittled on absolutely unforgivable and nearly incomprehensible levels, and God sees and knows and feels that pain right alongside us. Forgiving, with the power of God alongside you, does not ignore or take away the pain of what has happened, but it does allow the hope for something better. Hope is always found where there is life, and thank God for that unending hope and promise of new life made in Christ Jesus.

As we lean into that promise of hope and new life, forgiveness plays a central role. Forgiveness is a crucial way we lean into the commandments of Christ to love God and love our neighbors above all else. Forgiveness provides healing and grace and mercy within ourselves as well as towards others, and it is truly only possible with these promises of hope and new life given by God. We show generosity to one another when we give enough of ourselves to forgive and be in relationship with our fellow people. Just as the king is generous with the slave and threatens pain without the forgiveness, we too are called to be generous with one another through our forgiving. That commitment to one another, by the grace and mercy and love of God, is what heals us, in our hearts and minds and spirits. For these gifts made possible through God, we give unending thanks and pray for the strength to forgive from our hearts. Amen.