

## Forgiveness as an expression of mercy

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What have we said about mercy?

- God is merciful. I hope that we've shown this during these several worship services in March. God is merciful. This is who God is, and God's mercy does not depend on whether we do anything to deserve it or not.

Today, I ask you to consider one way that the mercy of God finds its way into our lives. How does mercy go from being a characteristic of God to being a tangible part of the world? One way is Forgiveness. Forgiveness, like mercy, is a gift that is given even though it is undeserved. I hurt you and I deserve judgment, punishment, but you decide to forgive. Because forgiveness is not deserved, it rattles our sense of fairness. Just like mercy, forgiveness is shocking. But the free gift of forgiveness is also essential to human life.

As you think about the place of forgiveness in your own life, I'd like to read one of the many stories that Jesus tells about forgiveness. This is Luke's gospel, the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter.

<sup>36</sup> When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

<sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

<sup>41</sup> "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

<sup>44</sup> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup> The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Jesus talks about forgiveness all the time. As Jesus describes the Kingdom of God, forgiveness is like the Kingdom's water supply—it is the thing without which there *cannot be life*. Why? Why is forgiveness essential? For one, it is because you and I can't go half a day without hurting each other.

We are made by God as immaculately relational beings. We need each other desperately. We are designed to respond to every signal and gesture and word from one another. We covet each others' support and kindness, our touch and love. We are built by God to relate! And yet, we cannot help but hurt each other. We do this when we dismiss or ignore. We misread and misjudge. We poke harmless fun that's not harmless at all. We take things from one another—objects, labor, dignity, confidence, safety—and don't give them back. We use and abuse each other. We hurt each other every day.

This means that our relationships are always off-kilter. When our relationships are off-kilter—when we don't stand with one another in freedom and interdependence and love, the world is off-kilter, too. Our theological language says we sin against one another in thought, word, and deed. Sometimes trivially, sometimes grievously. Sin causes pain.

Jesus is aware of all of this hurt. This sin. He knows the tension and anger that grows in the petri dish of unacknowledged, unnamed, unforgiven sin. Jesus knows that our world *without forgiveness* is untenable...

The poet Robert Frost writes,

If one by one we counted people out  
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long  
To get so we had no one left to live with.  
For to be social is to be forgiving

You and I need forgiveness as a constant presence, setting our relationships right. So Jesus talks about forgiveness all the time. Ad nauseum. How many times must I forgive? Seventy times seven times he says to Peter. All the time, every day.

When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, how to set and orient our hearts and minds toward life in God's Commonwealth, Jesus tells us, "say Our Father in heaven, holy is your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our...."

Our... our what? That's a good question.

Here at NDPC, we've been saying, "Forgive us our sins." But can you really trust us? After all, we added Mother to the opening line of the Lord's Prayer because we're sure God is not a dude. You can't trust us to translate what Jesus says we need forgiveness from. The direct translation is actually not "sin," but "debts." As in "forgive us our *debts*," forgive what we owe. Christians assume this means what we owe as debt for our sin of hurting each other, the punishment we are due. But the literal meaning of Jesus' most famous prayer is that he calls for the forgiveness of financial debt as a sign of entry into God's Kingdom. So which is it? What are we praying for when we pray this prayer?

In the Commonwealth of God, as it is described by Jesus and recorded in the New Testament, there is no clear differentiation between forgiveness of financial debts and

forgiveness of sins. They are virtually interchangeable. I have said you time and again, the “Kingdom of God” that Jesus comes to inaugurate is life with God on earth as it is in heaven. For us to live in harmony with God and one another, what must be forgiven are *both* sins and debts.

The Bible does not differentiate between the well-being of our interior life—of our hearts and our minds, and our relational life—our laws, contracts, and economic dealings. God’s covenant with the people at Sinai governs interior and exterior life. Jewish law—which Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill—is clear that every part of life matters. Everything in God’s world shimmers with holy potentiality. There is a divine order to all things. And our calling is to bring our inner life—our desire, our love, our dreams, our will—in line with our outer actions—so that our whole life nourishes the lives of others and nourish the Created World in thought, word, and deed.

One of the ways that the Scriptures articulates this aim of inner and outer harmony is what’s called the Sabbatic principle. The Sabbath. We are called to rest every 7<sup>th</sup> day to celebrate the sufficiency of God’s Creation; on the Sabbath, we are free from all obligation, all debt. The Sabbatic principle also says that in the 7<sup>th</sup> year, all debts are to be forgiven so that members of our community who are indebted might be restored to life and dignity. Every 7<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> year—in the 50<sup>th</sup> year—called the “Jubilee Year,” all revenue-producing property that has been taken through predatory economics is returned to its original owners. It’s a re-setting of our economic relationships that we might be restored to harmony with each—to right relationship. Forgiveness is deeply embedded in the Sabbatic principle—the principle that affirms the integrity and order of Creation.

When Jesus arrives in Nazareth during the Roman Empire, he is born into a place and time where God’s people are still saddled with debilitating debts. A tiny number of elites hold all the wealth, which they squeeze from the working poor. The average person was lived hand to mouth, and would often find themselves hopelessly in debt.

When Jesus shows up at the synagogue in Nazareth to preach his first sermon and declare the reason God sent him, Jesus says, “I have come to proclaim good news to the poor... release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free... and to declare the Jubilee year has arrived.” Jesus’ announces debt forgiveness. The good people of Nazareth chase him out of town because in Jesus’ time—and in ours, creditors get mean when debtors rebel

But everywhere he goes, Jesus offers forgiveness—forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness for offenses—real and imagined. Forgiveness from the judgment that said your disease was your fault. Forgiveness for tax collectors—to the men caught up in the creditor’s extortionism. Forgiveness for women in sex work like the woman in this story. And Jesus forgives the financial debts of everyone caught up in the brutal and ungodly economics of predation and extortion by the rich of the poor.

Jesus is a reckless and offensive forgiver.

Our burden—our privilege—as followers of Jesus is to ask why. Why forgiveness? Why must we let people off the hook like this? Shouldn't people be accountable? If you live carelessly and selfishly—like the grasshopper who fiddles the summer away in Aesop's fable, shouldn't you suffer in the winter? If I hurt you, willfully or even accidentally, shouldn't I be responsible?

Forgiveness, in my own experience, doesn't ignore the offense. It names it, rightly. But it does release the person from some—or all—of the punishment they are due. Forgiveness does this for the sake of restoring us to the harmony of our created order. It is the Sabbath principle, applied to our daily life, to every one of our relationships.

No part of forgiveness is easy—neither debts, not sins. As we've said time and again about mercy, it's offensive. And yet, here we are, after all of these years, holding stories like this one from Luke's gospel. In which Jesus sits at the table across from us, and in the very moment we have judged someone else's sin—and put ourselves above that person, Jesus—like he did to Simon the Pharisee, interrupts and says, "I have something to tell you...."

What Jesus tells us, again and again and again, is that God is merciful. God cannot help but be merciful. God forgives, whether we deserve it or not. It is God's nature.

What is it about you, Jesus asks, that holds on to the offense so long? What is it about the way you have made the world, the way you have structured and ordered things, what is it about the way you have counted up costs that makes holding someone's debt more important than restoring your relationship with them?

Jesus says, *again and again and again*, you are living in God's Realm now. Here, in God's Commonwealth, you do not need to ration kindness, or money, or love. Here, there is no scarcity of those things. Here, there is abundance. Abundance of kindness, abundance of generosity, abundance of love.

Here, in God's realm, God is not in the business of counting people out. Here, God counts people in. Beginning with you.

Live in the Commonwealth of God. Forgive others their debts, just as yours have been forgiven.