

The Power of Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

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Seven years ago, on a cold April night in Denver, Colorado, my car was totaled. I wasn't in it, thank goodness, but it was one of those situations that came out of nowhere and really complicated my life.

I had gone to bed around 10:45pm, only to awaken about 40 minutes later to police rapping on my door. A man had been drinking at a bar down the street, gotten into his car, driven around the corner, and slammed into my parked car before fleeing the scene on foot. Because he had fled the scene and no one saw him, the police couldn't prove he was actually the driver. The man in question said someone had stolen his car, even though his girlfriend refused to corroborate his story. The result was that my insurance said it was nobody's fault, so I was stuck paying the deductible and buying a new car--all while this guy got off scot free.

It was not fair.

Here I was, an honest, hard-working individual with a full-time job at a non-profit agency, commuting on weekends to go to seminary to become a minister, with no extra money, and now no recourse for what had befallen me. I remember being so angry at the injustice of it all. My stomach was in knots for days. I had fitful nights of sleep, as I wondered, "How can this guy get away with this?"

And that's when I began imagining the scenarios. I envisioned taking him to small claims court, pleading my case before a merciful judge, and then watching with joy as he got fined for his actions. If that didn't work, I envisioned finding out where he worked and harassing him until he gave in. And in my calmer moments, I envisioned a nicer routine, where I would send him a note, telling him my story and asking him if he wouldn't mind admitting fault so I could at least get my money back. I spent quite some time thinking these through.

And then I talked to my grandmother.

I was on the phone with her about four days after the accident, telling her the whole situation, sharing my frustration and anger. She listened intently and I could feel her empathy over the phone. "You have every right to be mad," she said. "Life is so unfair! And then she added, "Get used to it."

"Gee, Gram," I thought, "thanks for that advice."

But then she continued. She told a story from her childhood where she got cheated out of something because of someone else's wrongdoing. She cried and cried, and then her father came to her and said,

"You know this won't be the last time something unfair happens in your life. There is lots of injustice out there. But there are lots of good things that happen in life, too. And you get to choose where you focus your energy -- on the unfairness of life or on the good things that happen."

It was a simple statement from great-grandfather, a simple story from my grandmother, but it rang true in my ears. I had a choice. I could go on being angry, being frustrated, using my energy to seek revenge, or I could relinquish some of the control and expend my energy in more fruitful ways.

I learned then what I've learned many times since — that when somebody wrongs us, it is totally unfair. And we have every right to be mad. It doesn't matter if it's something seemingly minor, like someone cutting us off in traffic, or something more important, like someone totaling your car, or something really major, like the betrayal of a spouse. We all have a right to be angry.

And if we're perfectly honest, sometimes that feels good. There is something satisfying about righteous anger, about knowing you have a right to flick off another driver, or tell someone off, or be able to say to someone "you owe me big time." It gives us a sense of power, some sort of control over another person, and then we can wield that power however we want.

But there is a flip side to this. That power comes with a price. It comes with sleepless nights, as we wonder how we might get back at the person. It comes with the energy we spend, replaying in our minds the event that happened or plotting our revenge. It comes with the pain we inflict, when we react with vicious words or hurtful actions. It comes with the angst in our relationships, as we work hard to hide our feelings or cruelly air them.

It seems Jesus might have been onto this, that maybe it was that part of each of us he was talking to, when he answered Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" "Not seven times," says Jesus, "but seventy-seven times."

The numbers here don't really matter, since most of us would lose patience after two or three times anyway. Instead, Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a king who forgives the enormous debt of a servant, only to have that same servant turn around and be completely unmerciful to someone else.

Jesus seems to say it's less about the numbers of time we forgive or the amount of debt we excuse, and more about having an attitude of forgiveness, an *orientation* toward forgiveness, which stems first and foremost from the grace that has been given to us.

When someone is in debt to us, we have do power over them, and yet when we forgive, we willingly give up this power over another person. We forfeit our right to revenge. We cancel the debt. We level the playing field.

In this way, we allow grace to come into those places in our lives that have been filled with rage and anger. We free up space for healing, for new growth, for new relationships. And we let the productivity of grace replace the poison of resentment.

That resentment can be deadly, as I witnessed most explicitly around another drunk driving accident. I was in 12th grade, and we had one of those school assemblies where we learn about perils of driving under the influence. A victim of an accident came in his wheelchair and talked about what life had been like in the 12 years since he was paralyzed from the waist down. As he spoke, he talked about the pain, which was incredible, and the changes to his life, which were immeasurable. He said while he had every right be angry, he had forgiven the driver, and although he could never forget what happened to him, he had moved on.

That was all well and good, until he ended his talk by telling us that he had learned the name of the driver in court and had tracked the driver's addresses over the previous 12 years. On every single holiday and every year on the driver's birthday, this man would send the driver a card, wishing him a happy holiday but then reminding him that he was still in a wheelchair because of this man's poor decision one night long ago.

That was not forgiveness. That was bitterness, and while the victim may have been totally entitled to that resentment, consider the energy and the emotional toll that must have taken on both of them with every card that came in the mail.

But then you have those moments of utter grace, and the good that can come out of situations when we choose to forgive. I think of the Amish community in Pennsylvania, who just a few years ago, stunned the world when they forgave the man who shot several children in their community. No less searing was their pain, no less their anger, and yet, by drawing on the grace they experienced from God, they extended grace to that shooter. Think of the power they gave up in that moment, and think of their witness to the world.

Now of course forgiveness is not the same as repentance or reconciliation. In fact, sometimes we have to learn to forgive without ever having someone say "I'm sorry" or without ever restoring a relationship to the way it was.

But even without the guarantee of repentance or reconciliation, forgiveness is one way that we find hope in the midst of this life. It's one way we refuse to let life's unfairness control us. It's one way we let go of anger, bitterness, and resentment, no matter how much someone deserves it.

All of us stand in need of grace, and with God's help, all of us can extend God's grace to others.

I occasionally think of that man who got drunk and totaled my car so many years ago. I wonder if he got ever got his drinking under control. I wonder if he ever felt remorse. I wonder if his girlfriend stayed with him. But I have long stopped wishing him ill. And I have long stopped imagining how I would get back at him. It was a choice that I had, thanks to my grandmother's good advice, and through the grace of God, I was able to let go. I released whatever power I had over him, and the situation then released whatever power it had over me.

Jesus says forgiveness is part of the Christian life. It's part of being a community of faith. It's part of living into the grace that God has already extended to all of us.

How might we invite more of this grace in our own lives? How might we let go of past hurts and wrongdoings? How might we relinquish control, not just seven times, or seventy seven times, but all the time?

Certainly we need to forgive our brothers and sisters, but it's as much an exercise for us as it is for them. Let us be a community that forgives, and in so doing, let us live out the abundant grace of God.

Amen.