

Last weekend we reflected on Jesus' words to the disciples as he gave them a plan to work through sin and brokenness between members of the church. And as we talked together we acknowledged that we are going to mess up and hurt each other. Jesus knew it would happen and keep happening because we are imperfect people. So he gave a plan for how to seek reconciliation...to heal our hurts.

Immediately following this discussion, Peter comes to Jesus in the words you heard today. Peter asked, "How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?" Peter clearly heard Jesus' call to forgive and work out our differences, but then he wanted to know how far that goes. "How many times should I forgive someone, seven times?" Seventy-seven or seven times seventy, Jesus responds.

As Jesus often does, he answers by telling a parable—as fictional story to convey a truth and deliver a message. In this parable there is a king who wants to settle accounts with his slaves and so he has them brought before him. He tells them to pay up, especially the slave who owes him an incomprehensible amount: ten thousand talents. Just to get some perspective here, a talent was worth about 15 years of wages for a laborer...and he owed the king ten thousand talents!

When that slave saw that the day of reckoning had come for him he had no choice but to beg for mercy. There was no way he could ever repay such a sum. The king heard his plea and forgave the debt. All of it! Just imagine how that would make someone feel to have that kind of debt removed. Sweet freedom. A new life was his. But in the parable what does this man of new life do? He tracks down someone who owes him money, much less than he owed the king, but a good sum nonetheless, and he demanded that he repay the debt or he'd have him imprisoned. That one begged for mercy, but received none from this one who just received abundant mercy from the king.

When the king learned that the slave he forgave did not pass on this same mercy and forgiveness to the next person, the king threw the first slave back into prison. Jesus then points out that God's will is that as we have been forgiven, so we are to forgive others. That's the way it is to work in God's kingdom and among God's people.

Some of Jesus' parables are hard to understand and apply to our lives. **THIS IS NOT ONE OF THEM.** It is very clear what Jesus is saying. It is very clear what God is asking of us. Our God, who has released us from the debt of our sin that can never be repaid, now expects us to release one another from the sins and hurts others have done to us.

One commentator on this passage points out this perspective we need to see:

For God—a life set free is worth more than the largest amount of money.

For the slave, seeing from a human perspective, money is worth more than the free life of a fellow slave.

There was a story I heard on the radio this week:

"CLEVELAND (AP) — An Ohio man who missed his weekly work lottery pool while out injured is suing his co-workers for a share of the \$99 million jackpot.

Edward Hairston, a logistics agent at the KraftMaid company, says that every month for the last five years he entered \$5 into a lottery pool with his co-workers.

Unfortunately for him, while Hairston was recovering from a back injury and unable to make his payments, the group won the Aug. 5 Mega Millions drawing.

When Hairston tried to collect his winnings, he found the other members had kicked him out.

Hairston's lawyer tells The Plain Dealer (<http://bit.ly/pykCji>) newspaper that the group had an unwritten policy to cover for colleagues who were unable to pay due to illness or vacation."

Now I don't know whether there was an unwritten policy of now, but this seems like a rotten thing to do to someone who had been a part of the group. The two broadcasters I listened to pointed out that each of the group cleared about \$2 million while he got nothing. If they had included him they all would have cleared \$1.9 million.

I mention this story not because it has anything to do with forgiveness, but because it highlights how our human sense of mercy and grace toward others can be compromised for so little, much like the slave in the parable.

I want to name something that a few of us might be thinking about the theme of today's Bible readings. We're talking about forgiveness again at the same time when our nation is remembering the horrific

attacks of ten years ago. This may be really uncomfortable for us because it seems too horrific and too impossible that we would actually forgive this attack and the lives lost. Could God be calling us to apply today's Word even to that?

I have to let God answer that and you to listen and decide what you hear God saying: Peter asked, "How many times shall I forgive, seven times? Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In the parable the King forgives a debt worth ten times MORE than fifteen years wages, an unimaginable debt. What is God saying to us and how do we apply that in our world today?

Of the many television shows this week that reflect on the events of ten years ago, one focused on the children of 9-11, those who lost fathers and mothers, and other family members on that day. It showed how the deaths of their loved ones have shaped them and, as you can imagine, it has been painful for them to grow up without their parent.

I listened to the comments of the three daughters of Tom Burnett. He was one of the passengers on flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania and he was one of the people who fought back against the hijackers. What I heard from the girls was their grief and how much they missed their dad, but I also heard another kind of pain that I hadn't expected.

One of the daughters, now in high school, shared that whenever the subject of 9-11 comes up at school in class, all of the kids turn their heads and stare at her. Her teacher will say, "you can leave the room if you want." Of course everyone stares at her because they know her father was killed on 9-11. They call her a 9-11 child.

But she commented that she doesn't want to be defined by this event, she doesn't want to be a 9-11 child...she's more than that.

What happens when we define ourselves by a wrong we've done? What happens when we define someone else by a wrong they've committed? Then we are trapped, we are imprisoned by that wrong and life seems to stop. But we are more than our wrongs. We are more than the hurts we have caused and the people around us are more than the hurts they have caused. God in Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive all sin and to set us free so that we don't have to be defined by the wrongs and the hurts in our lives.

So much has happened since September 11th of 2001. We have welcomed ten years of babies born into our lives. Two of my three children were born since that day and they have brought amazing blessing into my life. Almost all of our kids who start Sunday school this weekend have arrived since that day. We have celebrated marriages and baptisms and all sorts of life moments since that day. Yes, our lives have been deeply affected by 9-11, but they are not defined by 9-11, unless we let them be.

Preacher David Lose, now one of my favorite writers on the Bible stories, points out that God calls us to forgive and release others as we have been forgiven and released, but God will not FORCE us to do it. In the parable, the great mercy of the King was given to the slave, but the slave chose not to pass it on to another. The result was that he was imprisoned again. He was trapped by his own unforgiveness.

When we will not or cannot seek to forgive others as we have been forgiven, we too are trapped. We then are choosing to define our lives by the wrong done to us.

The door is open and we can walk through it, but if we don't then we are caught in the darkness, the trap, the pain of the wrong. God wants us to live in the new reality and the new freedom that forgiveness brings. As those firefighters charged into the towers and into the pentagon to save those who were trapped, many losing their lives as a result, so God has entered our lives to save us, giving his own life in the process. If we don't push ourselves to forgive as we have been forgiven, then we are limiting our own experience of God's grace and mercy that has set us free.

I will close today with one final insight, a quote from David Lose about what this day means and how this text on forgiveness speaks to us on this day:

"We are called, indeed, to look back, to remember, to give pause to grieve the violence, destruction and death as well as to rejoice the acts of courage, mercy, and solidarity the day and those that followed called forth. But we are also called to look forward, to see and lean into a future that is not defined by the calamity of that day but instead is shaped by hope, possibility, and the grace of God." –David Lose

Amen.