

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Matthew 18:15-35

27 June 2021

Forgiveness

Greeting and Opening Prayer:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us this morning online. We have made it through. Our worship is no longer limited, our voices ring out with joy and hope, our bodies feel the winds of the Spirit, and our hearts and minds receive the forgiveness of God, freely given and unduly deserved. Let us pray: strange and mysterious God, we sit in your presence in awe of your readiness to forgive us. Fill us with your Spirit's power and hope so that we can extend and receive forgiveness even when we think it easier to hold on to our hurt and pain. Give us the strength to let go of our grudges, to put our scales and balances away so that we can more freely love you, our neighbors, and the rest of our world. Open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sermon:

It has been a month since I have shared from this space. I won't ask you how you feel about that. "A Summer of Stories" is what I settled on for our summer series. We will be exploring several of Jesus's parables, stories that shape us and challenge us and force us to rethink and reimagine what it means to follow Jesus. As you hear these parables again, I encourage you to note and share your own insights with someone during our coffee time.

I am going to offer a few thoughts on our story this morning, often entitled “the unmerciful servant.” This parable finishes out Jesus’s fourth sermon in the book of Matthew. This particular sermon is about how the new Kingdom community is to function together. The parable in our text this morning forms the end of the sermon, a story that is to stick with us.

First, notice in verse 17 that when someone has not admitted fault in hurting the community, the community is to treat them as a Gentile and tax collector. Most often, I have heard people use this line and another one from Paul to say that sometimes we have to exclude people from church, but in this particular passage and in the context of Jesus’s ministry, gentiles and tax collectors were a part of Jesus’s mission of restoration and redemption. Maybe what this text is telling us is that we continue to pray for and seek reconciliation as difficult as it might be when we feel someone is no longer listening. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

Second, notice in verses 19-20 the ideas of binding and loosing. In the first century, binding and loosing were understood as the actions that the community took in discerning and interpreting the teachings of a particular rabbi or teacher. As a community, we do those things that bring us hope and life and peace and joy and connection and deeper trust, things that are loosed in our lives and often align with Jesus’ teaching. We seek to avoid, or we bind, those things that break our connections or relationships and cause hurt, pain, or violence.

Third, notice verses 21 and 22; Peter asks about the limits. When can I finally not forgive and hold my grudge? 7 times; that’s a manageable number. In a culture with “3 strikes, you’re out” laws and mandatory minimum sentences, Jesus’s reply seems absurd to us. We listen to Jesus incredulously, wondering, “But Jesus, an unlimited number of times;” that is what 70 times 7 means. Asking this question also reminds us how much more naturally holding a grudge comes to us. Even though we know that the grudge or anger is not healthy for us, nor is it helpful for

any other relationship. We must forgive and continue forgiving because when the tables are turned, we hope that people will give us the same forgiveness and grace.

Fourth, notice Matthew 18:24. Ten thousand talents would be most appropriately defined in our present context as billions of dollars, more than this servant would be able to pay back in her entire lifetime. This large amount of money is helpful in understanding how sin's full and comprehensive effects are never fully known. Ten thousand talents gives weight to the deep pain that we cause one another and prevents us from thinking we can fully atone for our actions. Our hurts and pains extend beyond just the two people in a particular incident. Like a large rock getting tossed in the middle of the lake, some people will get splashed directly with water, but even more people will feel the ripple of the waves that the rock sends out across the lake.

Finally in verse 31, I had never noticed that the servant's colleagues do not follow Jesus's initial teaching in our passage. His colleagues tattled on him to the king, but they did not have to take that step. They could have gone to the servant and asked him how he had just been forgiven such a massive debt and could not allow his debtor the time needed to repay 3 months' wages. How often have we not gone directly to the person that we have hurt or who has hurt us and rather seek to get others involved when we could have resolved it between just the two of us?

As I complete this reflection on forgiveness, I think of people that have hurt me, but I also think of people whom I have hurt. I think about the last 15 months of pandemic and how disagreement, anger, frustration, and conflict were front and center. As you reflect on the last year or more, can you think of someone that you hurt intentionally or unintentionally in an argument or conversation? How is this story speaking to those moments that you remember? Did you say or do things that you had not intended to? In what ways do we need to walk into new life

after the pandemic, asking for forgiveness from those we have hurt and extending forgiveness to those who have hurt us?

As much as we hate to say it, sometimes we would much rather hold those hurts and pains than forgive, and we would much rather just move on than actually ask someone else for forgiveness. If there's anything I've heard a lot in the last month or two, it is that we need to move on, get past the last 15 months, and I agree that we need to move forward and get back to normal, but that doesn't mean that we just forget the ways that we have hurt or slandered or not trusted each other. If we want to move forward, then we must trust each other and allow the Spirit to help us forgive each other with grace, mercy, and humility.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: God of great love and mercy, please forgive our sins as we make our best efforts to forgive those who have sinned against us. Empower us with your spirit; help us breathe anew, taking in the wind and energy of your love as we go out of church today. Inspire us to reach out and attempt to heal broken relationships. Fill us with patient and listening ears and hearts as we live out your greatest example of forgiveness and hope. In Jesus's name, Amen.