

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35

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Then Peter came and said to him,
 "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
 how often should I forgive?
As many as seven times?"
Jesus said to him, "Not seven times,
 but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared
 to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
When he began the reckoning,
 one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;
And, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold,
 together with his wife and children and all his possessions,
 and payment to be made.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying,
 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'
And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him
 and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves
 who owed him a hundred denarii;
 and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'
Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him,
 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'
But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison
 until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened,
 they were greatly distressed,
 and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.
Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave!
 I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.
Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave,
 as I had mercy on you?'

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured
 until he would pay his entire debt.
So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you,
 if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

This is one of Jesus' great parables. It comes in response to a question from Peter with regard to Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Peter's problem arises from the process for conflict resolution that Jesus identified in the previous discourse (Matthew 18:15-20).

The Greek word translated as “church” in the NRSV—ecclesia—can also be translated as “community.” I think “community” is the more probable original meaning because in Peter’s context there wasn’t a church. Thus, the sentence would say, “If another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

The question of forgiveness is a generic issue in all communities and in all interpersonal relationships. When someone sins against you, how often do you forgive him or her? And if the person keeps doing the same thing, how often do you forgive? Do you forgive as many as seven times? Jesus answers the question with a symbolic number that is sometimes translated as seventy-seven (NRSV) and elsewhere as seventy times seven. Whichever way, what matters is that this is Jesus’ way of naming a number beyond calculation. When heard in relation to the previous discourse in verses 15-20 the question would be, “How many times should I go through the process of reconciliation? Jesus’ answer: an infinite number of times.

The parable is about a reciprocal relationship between being forgiven and forgiving others. The parable presents a contrast between a slave who is forgiven a huge debt and a slave who begs forgiveness for a small debt. The large debt of ten thousand talents was a king’s ransom, an enormous amount of money. There is a story of Julius Caesar, one of the richest men in the world, giving a gift of five thousand talents to the city of Rome. So this debt was twice that amount. It is unthinkable for any slave to have acquired that degree of debt. This is a parable about the kingdom of God.

The slave owed an enormous amount of money and when he pleaded with his lord, he was forgiven. However, he did not extend the forgiveness to a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii, which was a relatively small amount. A hundred denarii was the equivalent of a working man’s salary for one hundred days since the normal working man’s salary was a denarius a day (see Matthew 20:2). The fellow slave was thrown into prison until he could pay because the slave who had been forgiven the huge debt would not forgive his small one.

The issue in this story is the contrast between the receiving of forgiveness and the extension of forgiveness. It is related to the same theme that is present in the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us" (Matthew 6:12, 14-15). The expectation and the clear structure of this story is to emphasize that the extension of forgiveness is based on having received forgiveness from God. We forgive others because we have been forgiven. The two are interrelated and cannot be separated.

In telling this story make it as dramatic as possible. Emphasize the degree of debt and the incredible wonder that the slave had been forgiven it. Secondly, emphasize the contrast in the way the Lord treats the first slave and the way the first slave treats the second slave. Make the slave’s rage big, extreme. The Lord’s rage at the unforgiving slave, however, is best presented as a cool, controlled rage. When Jesus told this story, he made it very dramatic and made these contrasts as obvious as possible.

This is a story with which to have fun. It is also a story that gets at the heart of one of the major problems in human relationships, a reluctance or refusal or inability to forgive.