

“Absurd Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

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This is an absurd story, it's crazy. Think about it: Jesus tells a story about a slave who owed the king ten thousand talents. Now that amount probably doesn't mean anything to you so the absurdity of it might be lost on us for the moment. But let me explain: for a common, everyday person in biblical times, one talent—just one—was what a person would earn in about 15 years of labor (and remember people didn't live that long back then). So, the story is saying that this slave owes the king about 10 thousand times that—that's 150,000 years of labor. That's absurd. Nobody had that amount of money, not King Herod, not Solomon in all his glory. How could that ever happen that one human being could owe *so much* to another? And isn't it even crazier to think that someone could ever pay that all back?

But then... the king just wipes the debt out! He says, “Oh don't worry about it. It's nothing. You're forgiven.” That's seems even crazier, that one who is owed so much would forgive the debt in full!

And then the parable takes a turn. We expect that *forgiveness* will be contagious and the parable will tell a great story of redemption for all involved. But instead, the newly debt-free slave goes to another slave who owes him only about a hundred denarii—that's about a hundred days wages for a common worker—an amount far less than the first debt—and instead of forgiving the debt, he expects full payment. The one who has been forgiven *so much*, forgives *so little*.

Jesus tells this story because he wants his followers to understand that we cannot ask God for forgiveness if we fail to forgive one another first. But Peter wants to know how many *times* he must forgive?

How many times must I forgive?

Is Peter talking about repeat offenders? The guy who says he's sorry for taking your parking space (or in Peter's case, maybe borrowing his camel without asking), only after an apology is offered, the guy goes and does it again? How many times is Peter expected to forgive?

I've read this passage throughout my life and I've preached on it multiple times but this time, I began to see it a bit differently, with new eyes. What if this question is less about the *external* actions of the perceived offender repeating their sin and more about the *internal* process of the forgiver? What if the number of times we are called upon to forgive has nothing to do with repeat offences, and everything to do with how many times it takes us to forgive--really forgive--someone who has hurt us?

Because forgiveness is hard...

Rarely are we so good at forgiveness that, once we grant it, we let it go, never look back nor are we ever reminded of how that someone once hurt us. We tell ourselves that if we truly forgive, then it should be over, right? We can start over again anew. The slate is clean; the canvas is blank.

Well... forgiveness isn't that easy.

This *superpower* of forgiveness might belong to G-d but as humans, it takes a lot of work and we are not perfect. Think about it: When we are hurt by another, we become more cautious. Our trust is weakened and we might engage the one who hurt us—the one we have forgiven—with our defenses up. Suddenly things they say or do, things that we used to let slide, or afford the benefit of the doubt, now seem more suspect. Oh sure, we forgave them, but now we find ourself questioning the sincerity of their apology, will they hurt us again? Suddenly we might even find ourself replaying the hurt over in our head--like a movie scene where we've memorized all the lines. Sure, we said we forgave them, and we meant it, well at the time we did, but now we are not so sure. Suddenly we notice that the clean slate we spoke of has faint markings of the list of wrongs that was once written upon it; the blank canvas suddenly has smudges reemerging. If only forgiveness was immediate and permanent. If only that slate could stay clean. If only forgiveness could be *our* superpower.

But in truth, for humans, forgiveness is a process. And that process includes forgiving and re-forgiving and forgiving again, not for a thousand papercuts but...maybe,,for that one deep wound that is slow to heal. So...perhaps there is more wisdom to Peter's question than first thought...

Take a marriage where one spouse has been unfaithful. Tears have been shed, deep apologies have been offered, a desire for forgiveness and healing abounds. But this kind of wound doesn't heal in a day, a week, a month or even a year. The spouse who was betrayed likely has to make a choice *every day* to forgive. The wound may be slow to heal, and day to day it is hard to see the progress but over time, over a thousand and one acts of forgiveness, we experience the miracle of healing...

How many times do we forgive? As many times as it takes.

You know, reflecting on this passage now instead of two weeks ago, as listed in the common lectionary has—quite by coincidence—aligned itself with Yom Kippur—the holiest day in the Jewish year. Last night at sundown ended the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the holiest day of the year for Jews, a day that they fast and pray and ask God for forgiveness for any wrong they may have committed during the previous year. The synagogues are usually filled on that day. In Israel people don't drive on the roads, it is a day to give oneself over to spiritual introspection and think about how you might have done wrong. But did you know that the day before Yom Kippur is called Erev Yom Kippur—the Eve of the Day of Atonement. Before you are to go to God to ask his forgiveness on Yom Kippur, on Erev Yom Kippur, the day before, you are to go to any person that you may have hurt or wronged in the previous year and ask their forgiveness. Before we ask God's forgiveness, we need to ask for one another's.

In some schools of Judaism, forgiveness is thought of in 3 forms: The first is the simplest or most attainable *selicha* and it describes a release or a willingness to let go. At this stage of forgiveness, we are willing to put out of our heart the pain and the anger we hold because of the action of another. It

really has little to do with the other or their action and everything to do with your inner sense of well-being. We may not have received an apology but it really doesn't matter because this is about you. When you hold onto the pain and anger, you imprison yourself in the past and you are the only person that can set yourself free. We don't wait for someone else to come along and unlock the door with an apology. It's like that saying "when you hold onto the toxicity of anger towards another, it is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die." Have you heard that? You see, the beauty of *selicha* is that this is about you and God. So the first act of forgiveness is to let it go.

The second level of forgiveness is *méchila* and this level takes some work, Mechila calls upon us to really look at the hurt, consider what the hurt has taught us—about ourselves, our relationships, and God. We might even ask ourselves, "What part did we play in this conflict? Do *we* need to ask forgiveness? What has this suffering taught me?" We learn to look at the hurtful memory with new eyes and a deeper understanding. So where *selicha* was a release or an out-poring of negative energy, think of *méchila* as input---you're replacing the hurt that was there with a deeper understanding and a positive energy.

The third level is the highest and it is called **kapara**. With **kapara** we can rebuild, only what we create is even better and stronger than what existed before. It can only be achieved after the work has been done at the first two levels. When you take forgiveness to this highest level you are willing to create something new where there once was only pain and anger. By having done the work of the first two stages and having faith that the future can bring new life, we find that some of our deepest connections might be with a person or situation that we once found hurtful. Why? Because doing the work together rebuilds trust, and we come to trust someone with whom we *blew up a bridge* only to reconcile and work together side by side to rebuild the bridge--a new bridge--brick by brick. You trust because you worked together, cried together, were vulnerable together.¹

¹ Three levels of forgiveness comes—in part—from the Tomer Devorah (The Palm Tree of Deborah) a 16th century writing by Kabbalist, Rabbi Moses Cordovero. It is a foundational text used in many contemporary Jewish expositions on the process of forgiveness and is taught during the observance of Yom Kippur. A brief video explanation can be found at

How many times must I forgive? Well, how many times has God forgiven you? How many times must I forgive? Until true forgiveness has grown in your heart. How many times must I forgive?

As many times as it takes.

I mentioned before that I changed our order of worship around just for today so that we can use our time after the sermon as our time of confession. I'd like to ask that we have a moment of silent prayer, of silent confession. I want you to consider who it is that you need to forgive. Even those who haven't apologized. Who do you need to forgive anyway? Who have you been holding back your forgiveness from? Before we ask God's forgiveness, let us truly think how we can forgive each other. Every week we say the Lord's prayer together: "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Do we mean that? We say it each week. Some of us say it everyday. How many times will we say it before it truly becomes part of us? Before an absurd idea like unlimited forgiveness is how we live our lives? How many times before we become a truly forgiving people? As many times as it takes.