

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
13 September 2020  
Proper 19A: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

“Debt of Gratitude”

*Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea...  
that is, until there is something to forgive.*

It was author and theologian C.S. Lewis who offered this observation about human nature. We can be so easily split between what we claim to believe and how we behave. For Christians, this tension seems especially keen in that one phrase we so often recite in prayer:

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

In today’s Gospel, it is Peter with someone to forgive. Having been raised in the Jewish tradition and now as a disciple of Jesus, he knows he is called to forgive. His question is not *if* he should forgive – his question is *how many times?*

*Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive?  
As many as seven times?*

But Peter gets no pat on the back for his largesse. Jesus replies, *No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.* Jesus is not being literal in his answer. He is using a magnitude of arithmetic that would have stunned a first-century mind in order to convey that there is something much larger at play here. His is neither a question of *if* nor of *how many times*. Instead, Jesus reframes the matter entirely – that it is not about offering forgiveness to *others*, but about needing forgiveness *ourselves*. And he illustrates with a parable:

A servant owes ten thousand talents, an unimaginable sum in those days. Jesus again uses hyperbole to convey being impossibly indebted to one’s master. Upon begging forgiveness, the servant is released and his debt forgiven. The magnitude of the king’s grace and compassion is even more stunning than the magnitude of the debt itself. There is perhaps lesson enough in that much alone.

But the story does not end there. The servant will not show that same forgiveness to someone indebted to *him*. Instead of offering grace, he demands punishment. Instead of compassion, he shows revenge. He is fiercely reprimanded for withholding mercy when he himself has been the recipient of so much. He has violated the spirit of what is known and held across all time, traditions, cultures, and religions as the Golden Rule.

But, human as we are, we struggle to offer such grace. We tend to do unto others not as we *would* have them do unto us, but as they *have* done unto us. We tend to keep score.

Big difference there.

The call to forgive is sorely tested in the human spirit when we have suffered a deep wrong or when someone we love has been injured or worse. Some hold onto their unspeakable pain and imagine or even plan a revenge. Some wish or even pray for harm to come upon whoever did the wrong. Some will withdraw, refuse to trust again, or sink into a cynicism that robs joy from every day of this life.

But to refuse to forgive, to cherish resentment or thoughts of retaliation or punishment, is like drinking poison in the hope that someone *else* will get sick (*Nelson Mandela*). And as modern science affirms the connection between mind and body, we marvel at the prescient wisdom of the philosopher, Confucius, 2500 years ago: When you embark on a journey of revenge, you had better dig *two* graves.



To forgive does not mean to forget or condone the wrong. It does not mean that we ignore consequences or excuse criminality. Forgiveness is not opposed to justice and does not simplify the challenge of reconciliation. It is *not* naïveté and it is *not* passivity. Forgiveness *is* an active, conscious, choice – to resist the lure of revenge and reject the false promise that it will bring us peace. It is to safeguard our own soul and spirit from becoming corrupted in turning to the same weapon, the same poison, used by others. Forgiveness is a refusal to pay the perpetrator back in his own coin only to find, ironically and perhaps bitterly, that *we* are the ones rendered poorer by it (*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*).

With that, we dare to remember a first-century day in Jerusalem. Even as a wholly innocent Jesus was mercilessly crucified by a corrupt and brutal regime, he will not pay back his perpetrators in their own coin. Tempted as he must have been, he will not become like those doing harm. He will not forego the path of peace. He will hold to the Way of Love.

But such integrity comes at an exquisite cost. Jesus was tortured and suffered while the soldiers and others watched and waited him out to die. Even now, it is maddening to imagine the celebration and self-satisfaction of those who believe they prevailed.

But darkness, in fact, did *not* win the day...

...because, with the very last breath of his precious life, Jesus refused to yield his spirit to those who bore instruments of hate. *That* was his victory. He would *not* become like them. Even as his human body died, he saved his eternal soul. He saved it by praying,

*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

And in praying for them, he prays for *us*. Like the servant in the parable, *we* are the ones indebted – to a compassionate and loving God who, no matter what we have done or left undone, shows us the way of grace, leads us in the Way of Love, encourages us to look high, up to the light, and teaches *us* to pray forgiveness as he did...

...that we will not yield *our* souls and darkness will not win *our* day.

Amen.