

On Forgiveness

Biblical scholars have tried to come up with a definition of a parable for many years now. It's harder to do so than you might think. The most famous definition comes from mid 20th century scholar, C. H. Dodd, "At its simplest, the **parable** is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and *leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to **tease the mind** into active thought.*" Now, preachers and, still more, teachers of preaching like me, love that definition because we are all in on ambiguity. Give us a good, ambiguous Bible text to preach on, an opportunity to tease the mind into active thought, and we'll go to town. We'll dig in with relish and, by the way, if there really isn't much ambiguity, we'll create it for you. But, to be honest, there isn't all that much ambiguity in some of the parables. "The mind is not actually in very much doubt," for example, about the meaning or the application of, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan, arguably the best known of the lot.

In fact, the story only "works" in its setting in Luke precisely because the person to whom the story is told, the lawyer who challenges Jesus about just who is our neighbor, grasps very correctly the application of the story. Jesus tells a story about, you will recall, a priest and a Levite who pass by a wounded man in the road and a despised Samaritan stops and cares. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Got it? Of course, you do, and so did the lawyer.

Our parable this morning is similar. There is no particular doubt or lack of clarity about its application. It's about forgiveness. It all begins with a question from Peter.

“Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church^a sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^a times.”

And Jesus tells a straightforward story about a king, two servants, and some pressing debts. And finally, after some exemplary punishment of the servant who will not forgive, if there actually remains any C. H. Dodd style doubt about the application, Matthew has Jesus say, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Got it? Of course, you do, and so does Peter. There’s no ambiguity here. The application is not in doubt. It’s not hard to determine... *It’s just hard to live.*

There are, of course, a few details that are probably worth mentioning. It is, for example, the fact that in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus and the disciples, the word for “sins” and “debts” are the same. Sin is conceived of as a debt owed to God, a way of thinking that is unique to Aramaic, as far as I know. By the way, if you are standing next to some old time Presbyterians, when they say the Lord’s Prayer, you will hear the Presbies say, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” That comes from the King James version translation of the Lord’s Prayer and, ultimately, from this notion about sin and debt that we see in our reading. Another thing that may need a little explanation is that the debt owed by the first servant is impossibly astronomical. A technical translation might be a “gazillion.” And there is no way to pay it back. It can’t be paid back or paid off. It can only be ... forgiven. The servant can only plead for forgiveness. But even without those details, it’s easy enough to understand the story.

The servant is forgiven what he himself cannot possibly pay. So it is with us and God.

Forgiveness is, in the first place, a precious and very costly *gift*.

It is said that the German poet Heinrich Heine was asked on his deathbed if he believed that God would forgive him. He replied, “God will forgive me. It’s his business.” How do people say witty things on their deathbed! But while it may be witty, it implicitly demeans the value of the gift of forgiveness. It’s ordinary, for Heine, business as usual. But for Jesus, it’s like being forgiven a debt of a gazillion. It’s hitting the jackpot in the lottery of grace. There is nothing ordinary about it.

I might say that it must not be taken for granted but, quite literally forgiveness is firstly a gift, and as such, in the profoundest sense, can only be taken for granted, can only be taken as granted, as a gift of an unthinkably generous master. We do not deserve it but, to quote Clint Eastwood in the *Unforgiven*, “Deserves got nothing to do with it.” Forgiveness is in the first place a gift. It’s hard to miss.

But then there is another servant who owes a lesser sum to the first servant. He owes one hundred denarii, a relatively small sum by comparison to the debt of the first servant. Now, this is not a trifling sum. If a denarius is a day’s pay, as we hear in another parable, one hundred denarii, more than three months pay for a working man, is not an insignificant amount. Round it off at, say \$10,000. If that is small change to you, congratulations! But it is not an insignificant sum for most people. Let us not pretend for a moment that the damage we do to one another as humans is small and insignificant. Our sins against our neighbours, *matter*. But our debts are not always beyond our capacity to make good. Debts of this size can be paid back. So the second servant asks for time to pay it back. And, no way! Pay what you owe and when he

cannot, it is off to prison with the man. And when the King hears of this, he is furious and sentences the first servant to torture until his debt is paid. This is what a Middle Eastern monarch would do in a story set in the real world. We trust that it is not so with the God who is willing to forgive. It indicates, however, that the clause in the prayer that we say in church quite regularly and perhaps unthinkingly, is a frightfully dangerous one. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” “Forgive us our sins in the same way that we forgive those who sin against us.” Dangerous! Forget about the torture for a moment. To receive the gift of forgiveness is also to take on an obligation of forgiving others. Hard to understand? Application unclear? No! But hard to live and dangerous to ask for

Preachers love alliteration so we might say that gratitude is both present and precept, even practice. But is probably better to use clear English and simply say that forgiveness is both gift and obligation. When we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are at once accepting the gift and taking on the obligation.

In the Apostles’ Creed, which many of us also say in our churches there is a clause, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” The creed goes back to the very early days of the Christian Church. WE Christians have been declaring for almost two millennia that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. In the earliest version of the Creed we say not, “I believe in” but more literally “I believe into.” Perhaps that is because the earliest known form of the creed is a baptismal creed. Fathers, mothers, children, step down *into* the water declaring their faith, saying, among other things. “I believe into the forgiveness of sin.” We step into the waters of a Christian life, including accepting and practicing forgiveness and, fortunately, the first steps are shallow water.

C. S. Lewis became famous outside of academic circles when the BBC asked him to give some talks on the Christian life during World War II. He discussed, of course, this matter of forgiveness as both gift and obligation. He imagined his listeners, bombed out by the enemy perhaps, or having lost members of the family, objecting to his line of thought and saying something like, “What about the Germans? Am I supposed to forgive the Germans?” Lewis’ reply is that forgiving wartime enemies is like the calculus of forgiveness. You don’t start with calculus. You start with simple arithmetic. You forgive your neighbour. The first steps of forgiveness may be easy, But beware! The waters of forgiveness can get very deep. If we are not careful the gift may be swallowed up in obligation. And indeed, the obligation may even be heard chiefly as threat. But ...

In my first church, back in the early eighties, there was a particular custom on the Sunday nearest to Remembrance Day. On that Sunday, the veterans in the church would act as ushers and wear the blue blazers which are almost a uniform for Canadian veterans, with their decorations, medals and campaign ribbons. In those days there were still many active members of the church who had been veterans of World War II. All the veterans deferred, however, to one short and unassuming man named Ron. In addition to the usual decorations of veterans of World War II, Ron wore a yellow and red armband adorned with a rising sun and the letters: “HK.”

I had read enough history to know what that meant. “HK” stood for Hong Kong. In late 1941, the British government sent a regiment of inexperienced and ill-equipped Canadian soldiers, largely from Winnipeg, to Hong Kong, then a British colony completely surrounded by Japanese held territory in China. It was a purely symbolic presence. What could a regiment do against the several battle hardened divisions of the Japanese Army surrounding the city? But

Winston Churchill's attachment to symbolism proved deadly for the garrison. When the war began in the East, as occurred soon after their arrival, the defenders resisted as long as they could, losing many lives, but then, inevitably, surrendered. That was the beginning of the horror for the prisoners. Many were murdered. Others starved or died of disease or from the brutal treatment they endured as slave labourers. But some survived, sick and emaciated. Ron was among them. No Canadians had a worse war than the Hong Kong Veterans.

Ron was an unassuming man by nature and rarely spoke of these things, though he told me that he had weighed less than a hundred pounds at the end of the war. Eventually, when I had got to know him well enough to speak of his experiences, as I judged, I very tentatively asked him whether he still felt bitter towards the Japanese. This is what he answered and I swear this is both true and factual: "Nahhh. I like the Japanese. I've been back twice."

That kind of forgiveness and the resulting inner peace is its own kind of victory. They give no medals for such victories but they are real.

There was another person connected to the church to whom something terrible had happened in World War II. The person never actually named for me what that something actually had been though I made my own private guess. It was, nevertheless, only a guess so I will not share it with you now, but I am quite sure it was utterly horrible. In listening, however, it became obvious that the person had never forgiven or understood or let go or any of the psychological equivalent terms. The anger remained a present reality then almost forty years on.

I have never seriously suffered anything much. It was and is in no way my place to judge or even to speak of forgiveness as an obligation, as a duty, to someone who has suffered in a way I have not. It was my job to listen. It became clear to me as I listened, however, that one of these

two people was free of the past. The other was not. It turns out that the obligation to forgive others is not only a duty. It too is also itself a gift. And this matter of the obligation? Perhaps it is my job not so much to lay it on others, even in a sermon, as it is to take it onto to myself, to take one step deeper into the waters.

Let me put it this way: And the Master said to Stephen the preacher, “I have set before you two people. Which of the two do you think is free?” And I said, “The one who forgave.”

And Jesus said to me, “Go and do likewise.”