Extending Forgiveness

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Year A, Sixteenth Pentecost (Proper 19)
Matthew 18:21-35
Calvary Episcopal Church, Flemington, NJ

What an interesting parable we heard this morning! It really conveys a roller coaster of emotion. We start with a glorious act of forgiveness and end in torment. This parable is told in response to Peter's question, How often should I forgive? The servant in our passage receives the ultimate gift of forgiveness. A king wanted to settle his accounts and discovered that one of his servants owed 10,000 talents, the equivalent of billions of dollars today. The king is ready to sell off the servant's family to pay off the debt, but the servant begs for his life. Surprisingly, the king forgives all the debt with *no strings attached.* How would you have felt if you were that servant? What would you have done? You've just been given a new life. Your debts are erased, and your family is spared. Maybe you would pay it forward.

But what does this servant do? This servant who has been forgiven so much goes to his fellow servant, takes him by the throat, and says "Pay what you owe!". The servant owed one hundred denarii, only a few months wages. Like the forgiven servant, this servant too begs for his life. The forgiven servant, however, would have none of it. He sends his fellow servant to jail until the debt is paid.

Suddenly, relationships start to break down. The king's other servants become distressed over what they've seen, so they become whistleblowers and tell the king all about the unforgiving servant. So the king summons the servant and says, "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 have had mercy on you?" Now the debt was reinstated, and the servant was thrown in jail to be tormented. All of this happens because the servant wouldn't forgive as he was forgiven.

So what can we take away from this parable? Parables have multiple layers of meaning, and this one is no exception. Like the servant, through faith we have been given the ultimate gift of forgiveness from God of our sins. Through Jesus, God endured the cross to give us this forgiveness and bring reconciliation between God and one another. There are many explanations about how the cross conveys this forgiveness; theologians have tried to explain this throughout the centuries. Yet no matter the explanation, the forgiveness we receive comes with a call on our lives. We are called to extend that forgiveness that God gives us. We are called to extend that reconciliation that God gives us. We extend these things to restore relationships in this broken world.

Now, extending the type of forgiveness we receive from God is hard. We need to open up and be vulnerable, and we may be dealing with deep hurt. But this forgiveness is at the core of discipleship. In fact, we pray for it in the prayer that our Lord teaches us. We pray that God will "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Forgiveness is the glue that strengthens the relationship between God and each other. Without forgiveness, our relationships break down.

We live in a world that has become increasingly angry and unforgiving. It seems like the more we are connected, the more we see the difference we see in one another, the more angry, polarized, hurtful, and divided we become. It is in this world that we are called to be counter-cultural and extend forgiveness. When we extend this forgiveness, then we are bringing heaven and earth together in our broken world. Amen.