

“That’s Too Much!”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 18:21-35
March 10, 2019
First Sunday in Lent

I’m nine. I’m twelve. I’m fourteen. I’m thirty-eight. And I am home sick.
I am on the couch with hot tea and cough drops and access to daytime television.
It’s all terrible and wonderful. But there is one true joy, and it arrives at 11, Eastern: *The Price Is Right*.
A glorious, colorful, and loud celebration of capitalism! What is the price of Rice-A-Roni?
And what of Centrum Silver? How much is that pair of jet-skis worth? Here it is folks — a new car!
Spin the big wheel! Time for the “Showcase Showdown!” Have your pets spayed or neutered! Come on down!

I first think of *The Price Is Right* this morning as Peter tries to bid on how many times he must forgive someone, *without going over*. But the entirety of this gospel lesson reminds me of a *Price Is Right* game called “That’s Too Much!” in which the contestant learns that they are trying to win — a new car! — and are then presented with a series of ascending possible manufacturer’s suggested retail prices. The host tells them that they’re going to move up this scale of dollar values, and that when they land on the first price that is higher than the value of the car, they must shout, “That’s too much!” Do so correctly, and they win.

I want to keep shouting “That’s too much!” at Matthew. Jesus has just finished explaining how to settle discord in the church when Peter decides to try to be helpful. He’s going to get the manufacturer’s suggested retail price of forgiveness. How many times must he forgive? Scholars like to argue about whether Jesus’s response is “77” or “70 times 7” when instead they should be saying, “That’s too much!” Someone wrongs me — hurts me, wounds me, insults me, sins against me — and I’m supposed to forgive them some multiple of seven times? Jesus, you are way over. Don’t you know that when in doubt, you bid \$1?

And already we’re sunk. We’ve bought into Peter’s question and gotten concerned about Jesus’s answer. Even having read this text perhaps hundreds of times, a part of me waits for the answer, wondering if this is the time Jesus will say, “Twice. Anything beyond that makes you a fool.” Imagine if Peter had asked “How many times should I love someone?” or “How many times should I give thanks to God?” Preposterous. But forgiveness seems to have some fair market value.¹

Jesus knows that, and so we get one of his weird, perplexing, disquieting parables. (Buckle up, folks, we’re getting mostly parables under the Lent tree this year.) We hear about a king who clearly doesn’t balance his checkbook. Somehow, this slave of his has amassed a ten-thousand talent debt. That doesn’t happen overnight, y’all: that’s roughly 150,000 years worth of wages. If we assign an annual salary of a very conservative \$20,000 in 2019 numbers...carry the 3...that’s three billion-with-a-b dollars. That’s too much.

This man falls to his knees and begs, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Oh come on, man, that’s too much. I don’t even want to know how you got into such debt, but we all know you’re not going to get out of it through patience. You cannot pay back that debt. It’s almost obscene that you would even

¹ Commentary by David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-14-a/>

say you could. But wait...the king is speaking and...the debt is forgiven? Jesus, where is this going. That's...a little hard to believe.

As is what happens next: This man, who we would expect to be high-as-a-kite on debt forgiveness, bumps into a fellow slave who owes him the equivalent of about seven grand, if my math is correct working from the \$3 billion figure. He seizes the man by the throat and demands to be paid. The man pleads with words that must have sounded familiar, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." No dice — it's off to debtor's prison for this dude. In case you've gotten distracted by a bug or something while Jesus was talking, he circles the point in giant red ink for you, as the king finds out about the lack of mercy paid forward and has the slave tortured until he would pay his entire debt — which seems like it just might be forever, considering the circumstances. That's too much.

But wait, there's more!

It's not a new car: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your sibling from your heart." It sounds like there's hell to pay for a world bereft of forgiveness. I'd really like to cut to a commercial right now.

Why is this so hard to hear? By and large we religious folk have been okay with the idea that if you don't believe the right thing or worship the way we worship or conform to our standards of boringness you might spend eternity among some imagined fiery doom. In this one passage, Jesus has spoken more about forgiveness than he ever did about sexuality, and with some good ol' fire and brimstone. And yet, these words are hard to hear.

Forgiveness isn't fair. Sure, when someone immediately begs forgiveness for a minor infraction, and you can see in their eyes or hear in their voice that they really mean it, forgiveness works like a charm. They asked. I gave. End of transaction. All is good.

But when any of that simpleness becomes complexity, forgiveness instantly gets really difficult.

What if they don't seem to be sincere?

What if they apologize for the one thing, when what I'm really peeved about is the other thing?

What if they don't apologize at all?

What if what they did was so harmful that the relationship can't be repaired?

What if they're no longer around to ask for forgiveness?

What if the whole situation is just too much?

Forgiveness isn't fair. It isn't just. It isn't about fairness or justice at all. It's inherently unfair at some level. Theologian David Lose points out that if the person who wronged you could fully make up for what they did, if they could pay you back their debt, then you wouldn't really be forgiving anything. You'd simply have to accept the payment.² If you pay off your mortgage, your bank doesn't say, "Your debt is forgiven." If they did, you'd likely end up on the news for causing a scene at your local branch. Forgiveness isn't fair. Forgiveness is, instead, a gift. It's not transactional. It's relational.

Forgiveness can be a gift that opens the life of the giver. In 2008, actor Rainn Wilson — famously Dwight Schrute from *The Office* — started a digital media company with his friends called SoulPancake, intending to

² David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/03/forgiveness-happiness-continued/>

“explore big questions, celebrate humanity, and champion creativity...with integrity, heart, and humor.” Basically, they wanted to put positive stuff on the internet. (If you’ve seen those “Kid President” videos, you’ve seen SoulPancake content.)

A few years ago they did a series called “The Science of Happiness” and in one of those videos they ran an experiment. They asked their subjects — who had no idea what was up — to take a test intended to gauge their level of happiness. The subjects were then asked to think of someone they were holding a grudge against or had some sort of unresolved conflict with, and then to write down the problem and, as much as they could, forgive that person in their own words, on paper. The next step was to ask the subjects to read what they had written, with a mirror placed in front of them. And, of course, they were tested again for happiness. On average, the level of happiness increased by 8% — with one subject jumping 28% -- just from this exercise of forgiving without the other person even being involved. This fits with psychological studies finding reduced stress, lower anxiety, better heart health, lower pain perception, and higher overall happiness connected to the ability to forgive.³

Even with that kind of incentive, we lean toward transaction over relationship. And so many of us heard growing up that forgiveness works like this for God as well. We end up with a God who demands satisfaction for the debts owed by humanity, and the only way to pay that debt is, somehow, God’s own son dying on a cross. But here Jesus tells us that what God wants is for us to forgive. It is lack of forgiveness — not an unpaid debt (the debt is already forgiven, remember!) — that leads to damnation. The cross stands not as our receipt for getting bailed out of all the terrible things we’ve done, but as the truest sign of the lengths to which God will go to stay in relationship with us, to forgive us, to love us, despite the hell we create when we abandon mercy.

I look at the cross and all I can whisper is, “that’s too much.”

None of this is simple. We could talk about forgiveness for all the weeks of Lent, and through the spring into the summer and for the next fifty-two weeks and still not scratch the surface of the depths of its meaning. Jesus seems to be commanding forgiveness here, and we must be cautious about doing the same. Particularly when abuse or violence have been committed, we have to remember that forgiveness — if ever possible — does not mean forgetting. Some relationships need to remain broken to keep God’s beloved safe. And in less severe circumstances, we just might not be able to get there.

I’ve struggled this week with the video spread around the nation of high schoolers from Hoover saying vile, hateful, racist and anti-Semitic things to amuse themselves. I’ve struggled because, though I’ve never said anything quite like that in my life, I’m awfully glad there were no smartphones around when I was in high school. I’ve struggled because I’m quick to say, “they learned it somewhere!” and I mean to judge their parents, but deep down I know that at least some of these parents are genuinely horrified, and not out of self-interest. And deep down I know that the “somewhere” they learned it is just as likely to be “church” or “Alabama” or “life in these United States.” I’ve struggled with the fact that my parents could say “this is not who we are” and mean it, and yet I learned some of these very things at home. I’ve struggled with what future I want for these kids — some balance between punishment and a lesson learned and somehow not inscribing the nastiness they spewed onto their hearts, solidifying it for the rest of their lives.

³ “The Power of Forgiveness” at https://youtu.be/8o9_TlZyB_Y?list=PLzvRx_johoA_QznIVHjbByQdHZAhWRQzr

I struggle to imagine what forgiveness looks like. I struggle because I don't think this forgiveness is mine to give. I would really like a news story to break that doesn't feel like it's too much.

The forgiveness the king grants to his servant in the parable is too much.

But Jesus does not ask us to forgive the billions. He doesn't ask us to be the king in this story. He is describing the reign of God, the kin-dom of heaven, and he asks us to be the grateful receivers of mercy whose instinct is to share such mercy. When all else fails, forgiveness remains a possibility⁴ in a life that grows in impossibility day by day.

When you can no longer depend on boundless energy,
when you can no longer dance without a few creaks,
when you can no longer hear the high notes,
when you can no longer see the small print,
when you can no longer run the mile,
when you can no longer bear the load,
when you can no longer remember the words,
when you can no longer go out shopping for the birthday gift,
when you run out of the ability to perceive hope on your journey —
forgiveness remains a possibility for you to give and to receive.
Amen.

⁴ David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>