

The Table of Peace

Matthew 18:22-25

Romans 14:1-12

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Forgiveness is complicated, and Peter knows it. Jesus has just described the process of reconciliation from the standpoint of the offender—but now the focus shifts to the person who has been offended. Jesus understands that conflicted relationships wherever they are found are unhealthy relationships. He has called Christians, called the church, to do the hard work of working toward reconciliation. It involves, as we saw last week, sitting down in honest conversation at the table of grace.

The table of grace calls us to sit down with ourselves and discover the possibilities Jesus offers. It requires that we humble ourselves, that we listen to what others are saying. Paul Boers, in his classic book *Never Call Them Jerks* tells the story of a man who is driving through an unfamiliar neighborhood. It was a neighborhood in a different part of town. It was a neighborhood populated by people who were of a different race, and the man had heard it was a dangerous part of town. He locked his doors, rolled up his windows. As he drove, however, he began noticing that people were yelling at him, calling him all sorts of names, waving their arms and making gestures at him. Their behavior confirmed for him what he had heard about “these people.”

Suddenly, however, he realized that he was going the wrong way on a one-way street and people were just trying to get his attention. Boers notes how easy it is for us to become lost in our own stories of how other’s actions have hurt us – and reminds us that sitting at the table of grace means being open to new discoveries. The goal of sitting at the table of grace is reconciliation.

I sense that Peter understands this, but now wants to know something else. What happens when you are the one who has been offended or hurt? “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

It’s a large number. Peter understands how complicated forgiveness can become, and so he seems to be suggesting that as disciples of Christ our patterns of forgiveness so be as large and generous as God’s abundance toward us.

Seven sounds like a large number, indeed even a holy number. It mirrors the instructions in Leviticus 16 to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat seven times. Peter is serious about forgiving. But, as I said, we know that forgiveness is complicated.

If, for example, I mention the name “Don Denkinger,” some of you may have an automatic, visceral reaction. You won’t remember that Denkinger, who died in May, as a 29-year umpire for Major League Baseball, a man who called four World Series games, and three All Star Games. If you remember him at all you remember him for being the umpire for Games 6 of the 1985 World Series between the Cardinals and the Kansas City Royals. Yes, THAT Don Denkinger, made famous for “the call”¹ that ruled Royals player Jorge Orta safe, and was later blamed for causing the Cardinals to lose the entire series.

Memory runs long in a baseball town. When St. Louis DJs announced his home address on the radio, Denkinger had to receive police protection. Although Whitey Herzog eventually forgave Denkinger, many others have not.

But what about forgiveness that is even more complicated? Our family stories are sprinkled with incidents where a person, or sometimes, persons, have injured us. They have transgressed boundaries and have caused deep and lasting pain. Sometimes these people make no pretense of being upset at their actions. Unlike the man driving down the wrong side of the road, they never become aware of the depth of injury they have inflicted on others. How often do we forgive them? You and I can both list the number of reasons why forgiveness offered too easily or too soon can backfire and never create the healing it was intended. Perhaps that is what is sticking in Peter’s mind. To be upset that an umpire made a mistake and called a bad play is one thing. To know that someone whom you have distrusted has betrayed that trust – well, forgiveness looks different, right?

It’s complicated, and Jesus, to borrow a phrase, gets that. He gets us and our complicated relationship with forgiveness.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of every religious tradition. Our Jewish siblings will be celebrating Yom Kippur next weekend. It is the celebration of a new year, the holiest of their holidays. Yom Kippur begins on September 24 and continues for 24 hours as a day of atonement and drawing near to God. It is a day of discovering the possibilities of forgiveness. It is the holiest night of the year, a time when God’s presence seems closer than ever. A time for understanding forgiveness.

¹ See <http://www.si.com/longform/2015/1985/world-series-cardinals-royals/index.html> (accessed 9/17/2023).

We know that there are real and lasting medical and psychological benefits to forgiveness. According to a Harvard study, "Observational studies, and even some randomized trials, suggest that forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and hostility; reduced substance abuse; higher self-esteem; and greater life satisfaction." Forgiveness is good for us, and it offers us a chance to discover the gift of lasting peace.

But when Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times," it seems to become even more complicated. We would have expected Jesus to agree with Peter. Seven times sounds good. It sounds like we've done our due diligence in trying to repair the relationship.

Jesus, however, does not agree. "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Now that is complicated.

There are two things we ought to know about forgiveness. One, I believe that it is untrue to say we should "forgive and forget." Forgiveness, writes Lewis Smedes, "does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future."

Forgiveness allows us the chance to feel at home in our own skin once more, but it does not demand that we allow the person who has injured us to come back into our lives. We can, and sometimes should, entrust them to God and keep a space between us.

Secondly, all forgiveness is rooted in God's acts of forgiveness toward us. Jesus' parable reminds us of what grace does not look like. It does not look like a tyrant acting in some destructive way nor does it look like people who hoard grace they have freely received. Instead, we forgive as a way of experiencing God's transforming power in our lives.

So, imagine that tomorrow when you go to your mailbox you find an impressive looking envelope waiting for you. It is hand addressed, in elegant handwriting, with no return address. You touch the paper and feel the smooth texture. It is clearly something important. Curious, you set aside the junk mail – the credit card applications, the coupons, and other ads, and open the card. It's an invitation. Without identifying who sent this to you, it simply says that you have been invited to dinner tomorrow evening at one of the most expensive restaurants in town.

You look at both sides of the invitation. No clue who it is from, except on the back at the bottom there is tiny printing that says, "Matthew 18:21."

Who sent you this thing? You begin to worry: what if this is some sort of set up? Who is behind this? Is this some sort of trick? Beyond that, you realize there must have been well planned – no one gets reservations for this restaurant on short notice. Rather, it takes weeks to get even on the wait list.

All day long you think about the invitation. Should I go? What if it is some sort of a trap? Maybe I should not go. Maybe it would be better to stay at home. But then your eye looks down at the card one more time, and you notice once more the very last line says, “Matthew 18:21.”

It’s been a while since you have received such a cryptically worded invitation, and your curiosity is getting the best of you at this point. So, you open the Bible and flip over to Matthew chapter 18. It does not do much to clear things up. Indeed, its words grab a hold of you and make you more confused than ever. “Then Peter came and said to (Jesus), “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

You have no idea what any of this means, but you do know that a free meal at the best restaurant in town is worth something, so you make up your mind you will go. The next night, you get dressed and drive over to the restaurant. Without saying a word, the maître d’ sees you in line and motions that you follow him. He takes you to a back table, and offers you a seat. And seated across from you the person you want to see least in the world – a person who very long ago, and very intentionally, hurt you, a person you have never been able to summon yourself to forgive. The burden they have caused you is great.

A waiter comes up to you with a menu. There’s something familiar about the waiter, but you can’t quite put your finger on it. You’ve seen him someplace, maybe. He hands you the menu and invites you to take a seat. Facing this person is incredibly hard. It brings back many painful memories, but the waiter’s presence seems to make things different.

Inside the menu, you see that there are two options: one is a meal called “revenge.” It is a cold plate, and seems to consist of things that do not sound the least bit appetizing. The other side describes a seven-course meal called the “feast of peace.” There are all sorts of tantalizing foods. But the kicker is that while revenge is a solitary meal, the feast of peace must be shared.

And that’s when you realize that the waiter standing above you is Jesus. And in Jesus’ eyes you see the hope and possibility of restoration, the promise that we may be guided into peace, so that no one, will ever be lost. Amen.