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Matthew 18:21-35
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77 Times. Really???

There once was a millionaire who owned a lot in an exclusive residential area of New York City.

This particular lot presented a very unusual problem. The lot was five feet wide and about a hundred feet long.

He really didn't think he could do anything with such an odd sized lot, so he decided to sell it his neighbor.

But when he went to the neighbor, his neighbor didn't want to give him anything for it.

He basically said, "Look, you can't build on it and you can't sell it to anyone else. So, take my offer or leave it."

The millionaire was so angered by his neighbor's refusal and rebuttal that he decided to get even.

He hired an architect and a contractor, and had a house designed for that weird shaped lot.

It was five feet wide and ran the entire length of the property. AND it now blocked his neighbor's view!

He moved in and set up house in this narrow building. Each room was barely wide enough for a single piece of furniture.

His hatred for the person on the side of this small lot made him decide to ruin the look of the entire area.

The neighbors complained that it was a blight to the neighborhood. But the city fathers couldn't find any code forbidding it.

This millionaire moved into it, and lived there the rest of his life.

For the most part, though, he was the one that was punished. He moved into a long narrow little house that held only hate and discomfort.

The house became known throughout the neighborhood as “Spite House.” It stood for years as a monument to one man’s hatred.

When I first read that story, I thought, surely this is an exaggeration.

So, I did some research trying to find out whether this was a true story or just one of those myths that has been circulated on the internet.

Not only did I find out that it was true, I found out the man’s name – Joseph Richardson – he built his house in, I think, 1882.

But what was even more surprising is the fact that I found no less than eight other “Spite Houses” in just one simple online search.

There’s one in Carlsbad, New Mexico, built to block the Mayor’s view and annoy him.

Others are in Maine, Alabama, Maryland... there’s even one in Alameda that still stands to this day.

Sometimes each of us construct spite houses of our own by our unwillingness to forgive those who have wronged us.

While our own spite house is constructed of anger and hurt feelings, hatred and self-pity, it is every bit as uncomfortable as the one the millionaire built with brick and mortar.

John Killinger wrote: “To live an unforgiving life of restricted mercy is to live in a cramped and crippling place where there is no ease at all. In that place, we feel only our wounds.

“We hear only our hearts beating with rage. We decide we will be damned before we will forgive, and that is precisely what we are. When we fail to forgive, we allow our anger and resentment to imprison us.”

Jesus had a lot to say about forgiveness. Most of which may be hard to hear.

For example, Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (*Matthew 5:43-45*).

He also taught us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (*Matthew 6:12*).

And then he went on to explain: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (*Matthew 6:14*).

And then in today’s Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus a question a lot of us would like to ask:

“How many times should I forgive someone?”

That is a vital question to a lot of people.

How many times do you forgive someone who works for you before you hand him or her a pink slip?

How many times do you forgive a friend before you quit making arrangements for lunch?

How many times do you forgive a parent or an adult child or a brother or sister before you wash your hands of them?

“How many times should I forgive?” Peter asks. “Seven times?” Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, 77 times.”

Whoops! That’s not the way we learned it in Sunday school. It was 70 times 7 back then.

So, does this New Version of the Bible give us a new standard of forgiveness? A leaner, meaner standard for the 21st century?

Does it mean that the good old days when you could count on someone forgiving you 490 times are over, and now, you only get forgiven 77 times, and then no more Mr. Nice Guy?

Actually, the way the number is written in our text is ambiguous in the Greek.

It could be seventy times seven, but scholars say that it is more likely that it means 77.

Of course, everybody who ever went to Sunday school, or who has sat through a respectable number of sermons, knows that it doesn’t matter if it is 77 times or 490 times.

Jesus is just saying, “Forgive and forgive and forgive.”

We all nod our heads and say “Amen,” and then we leave church and still wonder how many more customers we can afford to lose because of that new salesman before we fire him.

We still wonder how many more times we can stand being belittled by an in-law before we stay away from family gatherings.

The standard explanation doesn't help much, does it?

Then we put that together with the parable that Jesus tells Peter and get into even deeper water.

As your resident theologian, I'm supposed to tell you that this parable is about God's incredible graciousness to us. And it surely starts out that way.

Jesus says that the kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who, in going over his accounts, finds that one of his slaves owes him 10,000 talents which, as we shall see, is a huge pile of money.

The slave promises to work really hard to pay it back.

Good for him, you say. But think about it what it would be like if you had to pay back all the money you had borrowed.

So, figure out what you would be promising if your creditors came to you and said, "You have to pay off your credit card, home equity loan, auto loan and mortgage right now."

How many of you could do that? (I'm not asking for a show of hands.)

Suppose you said, "Hey, I don't have that kind of cash lying around but I'll tell you what I'll do. I will pay you every penny of my income until I pay it off.

"I don't know how I will eat or pay for heat or water or light or my taxes, but I will pay you every penny I make until I pay you everything I owe."

Well, good for you. But get this:

A person who owes say \$450,000 on his house, \$32,500 on his two cars, \$10,000 on a home equity loan and \$7,500 on his credit card and who makes \$100,000 per year, still would take five years to pay off that debt.

And that's if, you don't add on any interest. And that's just if you had reasonable debt.

The King's slave had debt that wasn't going to take him five years to pay it off – but 200,000 years.

At the average daily wage in the time of Jesus, it would take this slave almost 20 years to pay off one talent, multiply that by 10,000 and you get 200,000 years to pay off his debt.

And you thought you were over-extended!

“I will pay back every penny,” the slave promised. (Ok, probably a fairly empty promise.) Here's a guy who is promising to work overtime, not just for the next couple of weekends, but for the next couple of ice ages.

Now look at the kindness of the king. The king was so moved, that he canceled the entire debt.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven may be compared to that king.

God has forgiven our debt -- a debt we could not pay off in 200,000 years.

How many times have we heard that? But having heard that – **does it** make a difference in our lives?

The slave who has been forgiven this unimaginably huge debt leaves the king's palace and he immediately runs into another slave who owes him the equivalent of about four month's pay.

Not a small sum, but if we use the figures we are given – about 600,000 times less than the 1st slave owed the king!

He demands payment and this debtor pleads with him in **exactly the same words** the first slave used with the king.

Unfortunately, he isn't as moved by this plea as the king was. Actually, he isn't moved at all ... and he has his debtor thrown into debtor's prison.

Turns out it's a pretty bad move. The king finds out and promptly throws him into jail ... presumably until his debt is paid off.

Last I checked, he's still there – only 198,000 more years to go.

What a story. An unpayable debt. That's paid for – so long as we forgive one another.

In other words, because we have been forgiven (Jesus saw to that), we are to forgive.

A grandmother was celebrating her 50th anniversary with a house full of guests.

Her granddaughter asked her the secret to a long and happy marriage.

The grandmother explained:

“On my wedding day I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook and forgive.”

Her granddaughter asked for some examples of those faults, to which the grandmother replied:

“To tell you the truth, I never did get around to making the list.

“But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I’d say to myself, ‘Lucky for him, that’s one of the ten!’”

Lucky for us that God has made a list of those faults which he is willing to forgive.

And lucky for us that every possible sin imaginable is on that list.

You see, God is infinitely loving and forgiving. There is nothing we can do that God is not willing to forgive us for.

We think lying and cheating is bad, but Jesus forgave Zacchaeus.

We think adultery is terrible, but Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery.

We think murder is the ultimate crime, but Jesus forgave those who killed him.

There is absolutely nothing that is so despicable, so awful that God can not forgive it.

We can celebrate forgiveness today because we have been forgiven for every sin we have ever committed.

So, being forgiven, we forgive, right? Have you? Forgiven?

There is a simple way for each of us to tell whether or not we have forgiven others. All we have to do, is ask if we are free and happy.

Are you free to go anywhere and be with anyone? Are you happy -- or to use a more Biblical word -- do you feel joy?

Some of us will say “yes” too quickly, just as we have said “I forgive you” too quickly.

We will say it, because we think we are supposed to say it. A good and faithful Christian always forgives and, as a result, that good and faithful Christian is happy and free.

Some of you are honest enough to say, “No, I’m not really happy, not like the joy I have been led to believe God offers me and I’m not really free either.

“There are some people I can’t stand to be around and some people whose eyes I have to avoid.

“There are some places I cannot go because they contain painful memories.”

Some of you are wise enough to know that this is somehow connected to forgiveness. That wisdom has come out of pain.

Sometimes, people will sit down with a friend or a counselor or a pastor and admit, “I can’t forgive. . .” and that simple confession is actually the beginning of healing.

I can’t forgive. That isn’t something most of us find easy to admit.

A priest wrote in Sojourners magazine about a little boy named Juanito, who lived in an orphanage in San Salvador.

He had been found as a small child beneath the bullet-riddled bodies of his mother, grandmother and three older brothers.

He struggles to keep his spirits up, but often spends whole days withdrawn, not speaking a word to anyone.

One day after confession, Juanito put his hand on the priest's shoulder and said:

“Pray for me, Father, so that I can forgive the soldiers who killed my mother and my brothers. I do not want to live with this hatred in my heart.”

People like Juanito know that they have to forgive or they will be entombed in the stone-cold prison of bitterness, tormented by the fire of rage, for the rest of their lives, and maybe, who knows, for eternity as well.

The servant that **the king** sends to jail is imprisoned not because of the debt he owes, but because he does not forgive the debt owed to him.

For me, the best way of understanding this twist in the plot of our story is to conclude that people who do not forgive, are putting themselves in prison.

When we withhold forgiveness, we end up locked up by our own anger and resentment. We are locking ourselves up, as surely as a jailor would, and we are torturing ourselves.

Jesus has modeled forgiveness for us ... remember, he even forgave those who put him on the cross to die.

We, too, can forgive. We can have the same peace that Christ had.

That is not to say that we are required to be door mats or weak or let ourselves be walked on or taken advantage of.

We are to be wise – but even then, we can also have the peace that God wants for us.

But only if we let go of the malice an unforgiving heart creates.

Let me close with a question. It's an important question. And here it is:

Who is it that you need to forgive today? Who is Christ calling you to forgive today?

Give that some thought now. Who do you need to forgive? Think about it ... and then do it!

Amen.