Do As Jesus Does: Forgive Without Limit

-John MacDonald told me a story some years back that has become a kind of parable. It was about a time when John was a teacher at Sentinel High School. His boss, the head of the department, knew John's heart and faith. He wanted to tell John about a conflict in his church. Anger and resentment were tearing them apart. And he wanted to ask if John might come help heal the rift. Was there something John might share that could help his church heal and reconcile?

So John showed up to the place this small church met early one evening. Someone was setting up chairs in rows, expecting a lecture. John asked that they be rearranged in a circle. And when the church members got there, I picture them looking suspiciously at one another, arms crossed, sitting as far from the offending faction as one can sit in a circle. John greeted them and began to read passages from the New Testament about the astonishing compassion Jesus has for us in our weakness, and the risky calling he commands: 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Probably the people expected John to launch into a sermon. Probably they hoped that the sermon would tell the *other side* to grow up and get over it. But instead, John invited them to begin with the Lord's prayer. And so they recited the words out loud with him. Maybe some were offering the words as prayer.

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors…

'STOP!' John called out, not unkindly. He looked into the startled eyes around the circle. 'My work here is done,' he said. 'The rest is up to *you*.' With this, he excused himself from a group of ordinary apprentices to Jesus who now needed to enter into some awkward, humble, honest conversation toward something as extraordinarily earthy and beautiful as the working out of God's grace./

-Forgive us our debts as *we* forgive our debtors. Forgive us our sins as *we* forgive those who sin against us. Forgive us our offenses as *we* forgive those who offend us…

We are apprentices to a Rabbi who invites us to pray these words and participate in a power not our own. The promise is that Life, wholeness, human flourishing – that no less than a *taste of heaven on earth* – is to be found in practicing the way of divine forgiveness.

[I'm reading from Matthew 18.21-25]

> **21** Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"
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> **22** "Seven!?" Jesus replied [eyes twinkling with mirthful invitation]. "Try seventy *times* seven./
>
> **(silence)**

> **23-25** "The kingdom of *God* - [a taste of heaven on earth] - is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of [ten thousand talents]. He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.
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> **26-27** "The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.'/ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.
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> **28** "The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him [100 denarii]. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!'
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> **29-31** "The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' / But [the king's servant] wouldn't do it. He had [this second man] arrested and put in jail until the debt [could be] paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.
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> **32-35** "The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?' The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he [might] pay back his entire debt.
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> And that's what my Father in heaven will do to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your hearts."

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let's pray: Lord, we pray, that by the power of your Spirit, we might apprentice ourselves to the way of your teaching, so that we might be surprised by your grace, practice your mercy, and taste the deep wellbeing of your kingship on earth. Amen.

So. 'The kingdom of God is like….' Jesus makes an analogy. He leaves us to chew on his words. He teaches by story. He draws from the world of his hearers' experience (you know, a king with servants) to surprise us with something as practically un-considered as God's graciousness breaking into our human interactions.

So here the kingdom of God is like a king who holds those who serve him accountable. The king is no Aging Auntie in the Sky who says: 'Boys will be boys.' No. Debts/sins/offenses – they have to be dealt with. No one puts their hope in a God who simply looks the other way at disloyalty, lies and corruption. In the kingdom there will be justice.

And yet the kingdom of God is like a king, who, when his servant asks for compassion, *rushes* to offer mercy. Unfathomable mercy, in fact. Here the king's servant begs for time to repay his debts. But hearers of this story would know that repayment is impossible. Ten thousand talents is the equivalent of 200,000 years of day labor! It is an unpayable debt. And note that the king does not *postpone* it. The king does not *reduce* it. Rather. The king *erases* it. Completely. Taking the loss upon himself. To choose mercy is both enormously consequential for this servant and

enormously costly to the king. It is the lifting of a colossal rock off the servant's shoulders and dropping it squarely on the king's.

When I was youth and college pastor down in Austin, there was a couple at Covenant Presbyterian Church that I hoped to be a little like when I grew up. Harold and Jan Skaggs. They were joyful, generous persons I watched make overt choices to trust in and apprentice themselves to Jesus. Their daughter Cameron was a quirky, kind student attending Whitworth U in Spokane. And one night I got the call in Mexico where we were building homes that a young man in a tall truck had come around corner late at night. Cameron had been killed in the crosswalk in front of the president's home. Jan and Harold went to police. They asked to see this man. And everyone cautious and concerned in arranging the meeting, as you can imagine, afraid of what kind of scene might unfold. But when they finally met him, Jan and Harold shared with this young man that they wanted to meet with him to share that they bore him no ill will, that they could only hope that he could embrace a larger mercy to overcome his guilt. That he might be free of shame. Because the merciful Christ was/is alive. // It was the deputy who was flabbergasted. He said he had never experienced such mercy in all his life. Who might have guessed how this moment left him longing to know more about these people and their gracious faith!

-Has this happened to you? Have you allowed yourself to welcome the news that the Lord ERASES your debts? Because this is the gospel. This is the good news we who have set our hopes on Jesus have to share.

Allow me to probe into your sin for a minute. What are you carrying? What ruining wrong? What unpayable debt? What broken commitment? What burden of wrong? What guilt and shame?

Friends one of the first principles of Christian self-understanding, (one that is in some ways is actually refreshing to look in the face) is that we human beings are fragile, fickle creatures curved in on ourselves in self-seeking, idolatrous, tyrannical sin. :) If we think we are special (in either our sinless tendencies or in our sin's particularly unforgivable egregiousness), the whole Christian tradition is here to disabuse us: theft, pornography, infidelity, violence, drug abuse, lies, self-harm, stuff nobody knows, thoughts nobody'd believe… Or, worse, says Jesus: superiority, pride, self-righteousness, envy, greed, resentment, hard-heartedness, sloth – whether our sin is hot or cold…Dear Friends, the grace of our Lord is grander than we can apprehend. And the scandalous news we have to proclaim is that *when we turn our hearts toward him, he cancels our debts. Erases them.* In Jesus Christ, the ocean of God's compassion has been loosed to wash away our wrong. Our guilt. Our shame. //…//

-So. This servant has been forgiven the debt of more than 2500 lifetimes. Praise God! One would expect him to go forth weeping and shouting in the streets, buying a round at ever brewery, picking flowers to give to children, whispering astonished news of this king to all in danger of giving up on themselves.

But what happens is both tremendously shocking, and sadly, terribly *un-shocking*. He no sooner leaves the king's chambers drenched in mercy than he collars some other servant of the king and demands that this man pay up what he owes or suffer the consequences.

And what is it that's owed him? Is it substantial? 100 denarii is worth 100 days' labor. The man who has been forgiven 200,000 years' labor demands payback worth 100 days or else. Why? He has an un-special, unremarkable sin problem. And so when this second servant, too, asks for mercy, what does the forgiven man do? He has him thrown in debtors' prison, where there is no hope of paying the debt. Why? Maybe just because he can. In sum, a subject who has received the king's ocean refuses his fellow a drop of water. He's received the heavens lit with sun, moon and stars, and refuses to share the spark of a single match. / Can you see why we might all of us need to be on the lookout for the sin of *unforgiveness*?

-Forgiveness is foregoing my fair right to payback or punishment for the wrong done me by another. Forgiveness steps outside the bounds of tooth-for-tooth justice (exacting what's deserved). Forgiveness steps into mercy (not exacting what's deserved). And forgiveness rejoices not in guilt or pain, but in grace (that blesses *beyond* deserving).

Amazing grace. I would go so far as to say that the *number one* defining characteristic of an apprentice of Jesus is meant to become graciousness, forgiveness, mercy.

So how is it that we who experience the unfathomable depths of Christ's costly forgiveness can turn so callously, turn so ungratefully, to lock our sisters and brothers up in the debtor's prison of our scorn?

How is it that we have persons running through our minds whom we have refused to extend mercy? Persons whom we have cut off from our hearts?

-This sermon would be so much easier for me to preach if I didn't myself prefer that a few choice folks quietly suffer under the weighty consequences of how they have offended me. You know, people who I've determined don't deserve mercy. People for whom even returning to their memorable string of offenses just feels too wearying and complicated and painful.

There's just real stuff that's complicated and painful:

Your daughter-in-law left your son; your trusted friend mocked you behind your back; you caught your spouse in a longtime affair; your mother neglected you to drink instead; a random stranger took the life of someone you can't bear to miss; someone you thought you could trust physically forced himself on you; some grinning someone holds your failings over your head with a snickering superiority; someone's unchecked selfishness has caused people you love enormous insecurity; someone violent words are stained on your brain; someone has reveled in the weakness or downfall of the weak; a whole segment of society has pre-judged you, discounted you, ignored or exploited you.

These things are real. They hurt. And it would be easier to preach this text if I didn't recognize that in refusing to forgive others what I really want is *mercy* for me, and *consequences* for them(!)

-Is it surprising that the king of this parable anticipates gratitude and mercy to flow from his sacrifice? That the king expects a ripple effect of generosity? That the thing he gets unforgiving about is unforgiveness? Are not the natural consequences of being merciless a prison of our own making?

Do you see then how stumbling Peter sounds when he asks: 'What do you think, Jesus? Is seven times enough to forgive people who hurt us?' Peter feels kind of generous. 'You know, seven times? Lots of chances? Kind of a complete number? Better than you'd get from most, no?'

And what does Jesus say? 'Seven times Peter? I've forgiven you seven times since breakfast. Would you limit the grace you so desperately need yourself?

Friends, Who is it that has hurt you?
What resentment and rage are imprisoning you?
Who is it you need to forgive?

The kingdom of heaven is like a just and merciful king. A forgiving God, abounding in compassion, who forgives without limit, erasing our debts at infinite cost to himself. If only we would receive the gift. If only we would do as Jesus does, giving the gift away to others.

-I want to invite you to take beginning steps in prayer.

Would you close your eyes and be in God's healing presence for two walks to the cross of Jesus? One to encounter his forgiveness for you. And one to invite his forgiveness for that person it's so difficult to forgive…

So imagine walking up that Calvary hill where Jesus suffers on the cross.
What is the guilt and shame you carry?
Can you see the Lord's eyes of compassion, his arms stretched wide in love?
Can you name you name before him your sin, your guilt, your shame?
Can you hear him say, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'?
Can you trust in his love? Leave your sin here? Allow him to absorb your worst?
Now let go of your guilt, your shame. Remember the kindness in his eyes.
Trust that he has erased your debts, that he forgives you.
Walk down the hill in peace….

If you can receive from Lord his forgiveness, his mercy and grace,
Then you may now be ready for a second walk to the cross.
Can you sacrifice your rights of retribution?
Can you die to your self-pity, your pleasure in pouting, your righteous wrath?
Now can you take the hand of the one you need to forgive, and walk them up the hill to Jesus?
And can you invite the Lord to grace this one even as he has graced you?...