

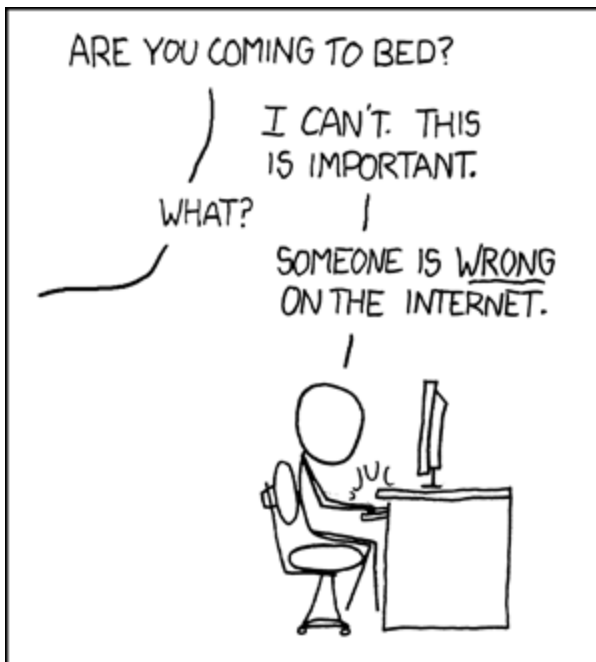
Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, September 14, 2014

“Forgiveness, Big and Small”

Matthew 18:21-35

xkcd: “Duty Calls”



<http://xkcd.com/386/>

Yesterday, as I was trying and failing to work on this sermon, I found myself in a somewhat heated discussion with some friends of mine in a roller derby forum. I was getting more and more stressed out, and frustrated because it was distracting me from getting work done. But I had to post just one more reply, and worked myself up again writing it.

“You’re being so irrational! How could you make me out to be the bad guy for asking a simple procedural question?! Why can’t you just stop being dramatic so I can write this sermon? I need to be thinking about *forgiveness*, not about how wrong you are!”

Wait. Oh.

Forgiveness is complicated, isn’t it? I’m not even sure we always know what we mean by the word, exactly. We know it’s something we should do, right? Because, you know, Jesus said so, and we pray it each week in the Lord’s Prayer, so isn’t that enough? Just saying we want to forgive people, that should count, shouldn’t it?

And we justify holding on to these hurts and slights sometimes by saying they’re just so bad they’re unforgivable! If we were to let them go, we think, it would be like saying, oh, what you did wasn’t

really that bad! It didn't really hurt me that much. So then when it does hurt, we think there's no way we could ever forgive it, because what that person did was just deeply *not okay*. And often we are right -- even the most well-intentioned among us do things to hurt one another which are truly *not* okay. As people we just get things wrong to various degrees, and fairly frequently as it turns out.

But is forgiveness really about just pretending nothing is wrong? As if we could paper over all of the awful things that we do to one another and just forget about it. That sounds a little delusional. Is that really what God is asking us to do?

Our text today from Matthew is a difficult parable, perhaps because it's so straightforward on the surface. As it helps in some ways to clarify what forgiveness looks like, it throws in images of slavery and debt and torture that seem just to complicate the issue, and make forgiveness feel somehow foreign and outdated, like there's not really an instruction here for us in a world where we like to think we have moved past debt-based slavery.

(But I'll save the student loan crisis for another day.)

Reducing all the many ways we hurt one another and miss the mark of faithfulness down to a monetary debt seems to simplify the act of forgiveness somehow: either you owe the money, or you don't. There's no middle ground, where the creditor *says* you don't owe them the money, even while still expecting to be paid back, and getting judgmental and cold every time you see each other because you're not paying back this money you still owe them even when they say you don't.

Sound familiar?

But even in this story which seems so straightforward, Jesus is exaggerating wildly to make his point, which I think we lose sometimes. The first slave owes the master ten thousand talents, which roughly translates to "eleventy bajillion." A talent was somewhere between sixty and a hundred pounds of gold, and so even 5 talents would make someone incredibly wealthy; to think of a debt of ten *thousand* talents is an unimaginable sum which could never be paid off in any one person's lifetime.

And this unpayable debt is what God has forgiven us, Jesus says. And while money doesn't capture all the nuance of sin in the real world, I think those of us living with debt might recognize the feeling of having this constant weight hanging over you, influencing every single decision you make. It's exhausting. But then to just have it *gone*! Suddenly having that burden off your shoulders! It's incredibly freeing, like finally paying off the car loan and getting to cross that one line off the list of debts; a sudden lightness and just a little less worry.

But that lightness, that feeling of being released from guilt or worry, of having just a little more freedom in our lives -- perhaps *that's* what Jesus is getting at with this debt metaphor. No matter which side we're on, creditor or debtor in whichever hurt we're talking about, forgiveness is loosening our grip on the anger and the guilt that festers and rots, keeping us up at night running through all the things we wish we had said or done or what revenge we dream of. It's turning off the computer and going to bed, knowing that friends and colleagues and strangers will continue to say things we think are wrong, but it's just not worth it to let that anger rule.

And yet sometimes we *should* be angry. If every sin were as easy to let go of as an argument on the internet, the world would be a very different place. Whether it is abused women being counseled that forgiveness means staying with their abuser, or African-Americans being told it's time to get over slavery because racism is over, we should be angry, and we should not just let it go and move on.

But that's not quite what forgiveness means, either. As Marjorie Thompson puts it, "To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution.... The behavior remains condemned, but ... the power of the original wound to hold us trapped is broken."

Forgiveness isn't just about the person being forgiven. That's one reason our belief in God's grace is so powerful – it says a lot about God's being to think that instead of losing sleep writing strongly-worded emails to every single person detailing how we have sinned today, God hears our confession and lets it go. We say a prayer of confession every week at the beginning of the service, and I doubt most of the time that it changes anything about our behavior (I have to admit that it doesn't always change mine). But God hears our confessions, all those awful things or careless things or ignorant things we do to each other, and says, "do better next time." And then whether or not we always manage to do better, God forgives us because God doesn't want to get caught up in fury and grudge-holding any more than we do. God has better things to do.

And when we are able to forgive ourselves and each other, we are a little bit more Godly to one another. We too can lift those unconscious burdens from our shoulders. It may feel like an impossible task, to forgive some of the unspeakable things people do to one another. But we try, not just because it's the "right" thing to do or because Jesus said so, but because doing so will lighten our own hearts and minds. Our resentment doesn't change the person who has wronged us; it simply takes up room in our minds, pushing aside love and hospitality and making itself at home.

In the words of the Buddha: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."

People will still be wrong, on the internet and in our pews and everywhere else we go. Or at least we'll still think they're wrong. But our losing sleep isn't going to change that; it'll just make us tired and cranky and preoccupied.

But just as God lifts our burdens and forgives the countless ways ourselves get things wrong, we too have the chance to put down the hot coal that burns our hands even as we plot how we might throw it at another. We too have the chance to act a little more like God for a moment.

Rejoice and give thanks!