

✧ Grandpa was on his death-bed.
 The preacher came by to ask,
 “Have you forgiven all your enemies, Walter?”
 Haven’t got none, came the reply.
 “That’s pretty remarkable, Walter. What I hear,
 you broke business deals, cheated at cards,
 and wasted your wife’s inheritance.
 “How did you get to this place
 without enemies?”
 Gramp’s self-satisfied reply: Shot ‘em all.

✧ You’ve probably heard the advice,
 Don’t get mad, get even.
 In the movie *First Wives Club*, a character
 played by Ivana Trump, adds a corollary:
 Don’t get even, dear. Get everything.

✧ In her memoir, D.J. Waldie muses
 on one of the unexpected consequences of divorce:
 “The biggest drawback to living alone
 is having nobody to forgive.”

“Forgive Our Debts, as we forgive our debtors.”
 Our first mistake is thinking that forgiveness
 is something that is ours to grant to
 or withhold from another person,
 rather than an impulse that originates with God.
 Our next mistake is glossing over the first half,
 “forgive our debts,”
 as if we don’t have any real debts.
 And the third mistake is assuming that in our lives
 we ever forgive our debtors.
 “Forgive Our Debts, as we forgive our debtors.”
 Do we stop to think what we are praying?
 Would we actually want God to forgive us
 to the same extent that we forgive others?
 Jesus turns that assumption inside-out.
 Only as we accept that *we* need God’s forgiveness
 do we recognize that God wants us to forgive *others*.
 Paul states in Romans 14,
 God invites all to Christ’s table.

Who are we to cross anyone off the guest list?
 Should we not have mercy on one another
 as God has mercy on us?

For Jewish-Christians at the turn of the 1st century,
 forgiveness was a spiritual obligation,
 God-ordained.

Wrongs committed within the family of faith
 were serious violations of the good order
 God intended for God’s people, east of Eden,
 a transgression against God’s will,
 against the Kingdom of God.

Wrongdoing was a burden one carried
 until it was relieved

by the offended party’s forgiveness.

The offended party as often as not was God.

And Hebrew scriptures accept
 that God’s forgiveness is not a given.

Particularly offensive to God
 are wrongs against Torah, the divine teachings.

Torah is not an easy burden to bear.

In fact, it is impossible to bear Torah perfectly.

- You shall worship God and God alone.
- You shall not worship idols.
- You shall not swear by God’s name.
- You shall consecrate the day of Sabbath.
- You shall honor mother and father,
 and their mothers and fathers.
- You shall not commit murder, or adultery,
 or theft.
- You shall not testify falsely
 against your neighbor, nor covet anything
 that belongs to your neighbor.

One of the great biblical stories of forgiveness
 is Joseph and his eleven brothers,
 who carried a great burden of guilt
 for attempting to murder Joseph back in the day.
 When Joseph rises to prominence in Egypt
 thanks to his own innate abilities,

he meets his brothers who are unaware that Joseph is even alive, much less powerful. He could punish them severely. But he extends to them total forgiveness instead. Forgiveness does not erase the memory of their offenses. Forgiveness does not mitigate the seriousness of their offenses. Forgiveness does not imply that Joseph accepts even partial responsibility for their offenses. What Joseph's forgiveness says to his brothers is, "For the sake of restoring order to our family, your offenses no longer stand in the way of our relationship." "What God wants to do about your offenses is up to God." "But what I want is for us again to be brothers, sons of our common father, Jacob." Had Joseph imprisoned the wrongdoers, which he had every right to do, the loss would not only have been to Jacob's, but also to God's family. The impulse to forgive originates with God. Forgiveness of debts restores in its own way God's plan for humankind. That is the sense of restoration that lies behind Jesus' stark parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It's easy to miss the restoration, the story moves so quickly from a master's forgiveness to a servant's unforgiveness. But for a moment, master and servant achieve a parity that hints at life in the Kingdom of God. Here's how I told the unhappy outcome when I last preached this parable in this pulpit: Eyewitness News catches the forgiven servant on the steps outside the king's palace.

"What was it like for you, being forgiven such an enormous debt?"
 Who says it was a debt, snipes the servant.
 The king can afford to write it off.
 It's a paper loss.
 Besides, it's the king's fault
 for letting the account get so far in arrears
 that a body could never pay it up.
 The reporter takes another tack:
 "What did the king say when you thanked him?"
 Who says I thanked him? What for?
 He was never gonna get that money outa me.
 The servant fails to pay forgiveness forward.
 Cringe at the gall of the unrepentant servant,
 if you wish, but we are right there with him.
 Forgive Our Debts? What debts?
 Like fish unaware that they live in water,
 we are unaware of our own moral debts.
 In the parable, the debt owed the king
 is enormous, greater than the debt
 of a whole nation.
 Ten thousand talents
 represents millions of lifetimes of labor.
 But the financial value is beside the point.
 The parable points up the injustice
 of an economic system that puts master and slave
 in an untenable, disordered relationship.
 A slave is no more than chattel to the master.
 Even the slave's wife and children are chattel.
 The relationship is based on power,
 the power of ownership.
 A surprise twist in the parable
 is that the chattel seems to have feelings
 bordering on repentance.
 Servants are not supposed to have feelings.
 Servants are not expected to have a conscience.
 But on bended knee this servant begs,
 "Have patience with me,
 and I will pay you everything."

Though it's a power relationship,
 this servant tries to play by Kingdom rules.
 Rather than be sold
 to make a fictional dent in the debt he owes,
 the slave repents and negotiates.
 By offering to repay the debt, even for a moment,
 the servant assumes the master's burden.
 Assumption of burden is Biblical forgiveness.
Assumption of burden is Biblical forgiveness,
 Christ-like forgiveness.
 The master, sensing a power shift,
 responds with admirable sympathy.
 Masters are not supposed to have feelings.
 Masters are not expected to have a conscience.
 “You are set free from my service.
 Anything you owe me is pardoned.”
 With that grand gesture, both parties
 are released to form a new relationship,
 along the lines of classic discipleship.
 The master is free of an unjust system
 of exploiting labor.
 The slave is free to follow (or not)
 the master's example.
 Such is the power of repentance
 and the grace of forgiveness.
 Eden is restored, if but for a moment.
 Aldous Huxley and his wife
 barely escaped with their lives
 from a house fire that destroyed everything.
 Manuscripts, correspondence with world figures,
 Huxley's entire library – all ashes.
 “It was a hideous experience,” Huxley confessed,
 “but it did make me feel extraordinarily clean.”
 Perhaps that's how the master feels
 releasing the servant: clean, unburdened,
 at least until the newly-forgiven servant
 abuses the privilege.
 The servant fails to “pay it forward.”

By the finale, the original power relationship
 is reinstated, even more harshly.
 How fragile the state of grace is,
 unless God's gifts of pardon are passed forward.
 We may feel removed from matters
 of master and slave,
 though it was but a few generations ago.
 Indeed, for some farmworkers
 laboring in America's fields,
 debt-bondage amounts to virtual enslavement.
 We are keenly aware of abusive power,
 especially in political circles.
 A former press secretary
 in the Johnson White House has written:
 “No one should be allowed
 to work in the West Wing
 who has not suffered a major setback in life.
 The responsibility there is too great
 to be entrusted to people
 who aren't painfully aware
 of how badly things can go wrong.”
 Experience of failure instills thoughtfulness
 when taking political actions that affect millions.
 I wonder what might happen if an elected official
 fell to his or her knees before the electorate
 and repented:
 I will make amends for the failed policies
 of my predecessor.
 I will atone for campaign promises
 that can never be fulfilled.
 I will release my appointed officials
 from political patronage.
 Have patience with me.
 I will make everything right.
 I will temper justice with mercy
 for the rest of my term.
 And what if the electorate responded, in turn:
 We admit some of the burden we place
 on an elected official is too idealistic.

We release you from unrealistic expectations.
 We accept that some of the reasons we had
 for voting for you will never be realized.
 We're not saying we don't care about promises,
 but we release you to exercise good judgment.
 We trust you, because you are being honest.
 We accept your change of heart
 and we forgive you your shortcomings.
 We will temper justice with mercy
 for the rest of your term.

Something like that actually happened
 in the Republic of South Africa after 1993,
 the end of apartheid.
 The hard work of nation-building remained.
 Racial suppression of the black majority
 had left deep-seated feelings of resentment.
 Violent conflicts dating back to the 60s
 had resulted in human rights abuses by all sides.
 No section of society was unscathed.
 No side of the conflict was exempt.
 South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process
 was the vision of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.
 Through official committees with court-like powers,
 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
 investigated thousands of complaints of abuses
 that took place between 1960 and 1994.
 Victims of gross human rights violations
 were referred to Reparation and Rehabilitation.
 Perpetrators could apply to a committee
 for amnesty regarding acts of violence
 which they truthfully confessed.
 The overall vision was to administer justice,
 tempered with mercy.
 When the final report was issued in 1997,
 it left considerable room for criticism.
 Nevertheless, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions
 are being set up in other nations which can benefit
 from the healing power of repentance
 and the unifying effects of forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

Accepting pardon – even just admitting
 that we need pardon – can be difficult.
Granting pardon can feel unnatural,
 especially when we have been wronged,
 or when we are sure we're in the right,
 or when the offender seems unwilling to repent.
 It's more natural to seek judgment.
 Jesus came to turn natural assumptions inside out,
 beginning with his Sermon on the Mount:
 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. (Mt 5:43-44)
 Judgment triggers judgment.
 It is more blessed to offer pardon.
 Pardon triggers pardon.
 The peripatetic peacemaker, Jimmy Carter, asks:
 "Does Jesus mean that we should love our enemies
 even if we are sure that we will not be loved?"
 Admitting our need of forgiveness –
 and accepting forgiveness – is not easy.
 But receiving forgiveness of our debts
 is a matchless blessing.
 It cleanses the mind, frees the conscience,
 releases the drive to keep living,
 and restores Kingdom relationships.
 Jesus wants to turn our assumptions inside-out.
 Only as we accept that we need forgiveness
 can we recognize that others need our forgiveness.
 Amen.