

## **Pay It Forward**

Psalm 32:1-7  
Matthew 18:21-35

Last Sunday we opened the sermon by following the course of the River Jordan from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Today we go straight back to these places. The Sea of Galilee teems with life. Fish, birds, surrounded by fertile fields, it is a rich ecosystem that contributes greatly to Israel's tables. The Dead Sea has almost no life in it at all, just a few fish species that have adapted to its high level of salinity. Why does the same river produce two such disparate environments? The answer is one of the oldest sermon illustrations in existence. This one is so old not even Wikipedia pretends to be able to find its original author. The answer is that while the River Jordan feeds the Sea of Galilee, it also drains it. The Dead Sea keeps its water until it evaporates. There is no lower place on Earth for that water to flow. It just dissolves ever more salt from the surrounding desert as the water disappears into the hot, dry sky. The Sea of Galilee gives as well as takes. The Dead Sea simply takes.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive the same man and guessed the answer was seven, he probably thought he was being generous. The rabbis of the time said three times, "with no forgiveness for four or more of the same offense", as the Mishna had it. (The Mishna is a collection of interpretations of the Old Testament law. It appeared in the third century of the Christian Era, but most all of it

existed in the oral tradition of Jesus' day.) Jesus' answer of seventy-seven, or seventy times seven (the Greek text permits either translation), would have rocked his hearers' back onto their emotional heels. His real meaning, of course, is that we must forgive every time somebody sins against us. After all, we have received forgiveness. Giving it drains the poison that otherwise ruins our relationships with God and one another. And he told a parable to demonstrate his seriousness about this matter.

A king demands his debtors repay him. One comes in owing ten thousand talents. Commentators argue over how much this sum would be worth in today's dollars. D.A. Carson gives the best answer: "The total is impossible to know, but we can at least say it would be astronomical." Since he could never repay it all, the king orders him sold, along with his wife and children, into slavery. The man begs for mercy. The king pities him and "*forgives* him the debt." The man promptly runs into somebody who owes him one hundred denarii. All scholars seem to agree this would equate to about one hundred days of wages. So this amount, while still considerable, is not unpayable. The man immediately grabs his debtor by the throat and demands repayment. The other man begs for mercy. The one recently forgiven the astronomical sum throws him in prison.

Witnesses to both episodes gain an audience with the king and, "reported to him in great detail everything they had seen", as it says in the original Greek. Enraged that this servant could take—but not give—forgiveness the king has him thrown into prison "until he should pay all his debt." By now we know he can *never* pay it all off. Which

means Jesus intends this to signal eternal punishment. He drives it home with, “So also will my heavenly Father do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” How many times must we forgive one another? **Every** time. God pours the living waters into us. We must not try to retain them. That way lie the dead waters of the Dead Sea. We must share the spirit, share the love, share forgiveness. That way lies life.

One October morning in Dacula Georgia Erik Fitzgerald, a youth pastor, was awakened by loud knocking on his front door. He opened it to see a grim-faced state trooper. He brought news that Erik's wife's car was struck head-on by a firefighter who fell asleep at the wheel driving home at the end of a 24-hour shift. His wife, June, died instantly, along with her unborn child. Faith, his then-19-month-old daughter, survived the crash. Amid the grief, Erik, recognized a God-given opportunity to practice the forgiveness at the heart of the message of Jesus he preached. Erik refused to press any of the heavy charges the prosecutor recommended, charges like manslaughter. Instead, he agreed to charge him only with traffic-related offenses. When the jury found the firefighter, Matt Swatzell guilty, Fitzgerald pleaded for lenient sentencing so Matt could avoid prison time, and he ended up with only community service and a fine.

Not long afterwards, Matt and Erik met by chance in a grocery store parking lot and began to talk—a circumstance both saw as God-ordained. That led to a friendship that continues to this day. They credit their conversations as the key to letting them

heal from the loss and pain and guilt. The story was featured on NBC's [Today Show](#) in 2014 after it picked up 3.5 million views on the Web. You can read an [updated account](#) of Matthew and Erik's story to see how Jesus has continued to bless their lives by going to the Today Show's web page and searching the men's names.

I have spoken before of the man in Traverse City, Michigan who was driving on a suspended license, and more importantly, on methamphetamine, who struck and killed three high school girls. The black box in his pickup clocked him at ninety miles per hour when he hit their subcompact. Two of the girls' families made a public statement that they forgave him. The third did not. We knew people who knew them. Two of our very closest friends had a son who played in the marching band with the girls. Maybe a year later she told us the third family, still embittered, adamantly refused even to try to forgive the driver. Our friend said being around them was like being around “hand grenades with the pins pulled out.” Their inability to forgive made them angry, impatient, temperamental. Now let us pause a moment right here. If a meth-head without a license killed my daughter I don't know that I could forgive him either. This stuff is much easier to say than it is to do.

Yet the call to forgive—and the power of forgiveness—remain. Jesus made it crystal clear that we must forgive, and keep on forgiving, one another. The Hebrew King David, author of Psalm 32, understood both the imperative and the power. “When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away,” he wrote. This likely referred to

an actual wasting disease. Paleobiologists know from the condition of many bodies they have examined that diphtheria and typhoid fever were common three thousand years ago in Western Asia and the Middle East. And while some recent scholarship disputes the theory, most biblical scholars agree David's people saw a direct connection between sin and disease. Because he failed to confess his sin, he thought, he got sick. It was God's punishment.

Ah, but when "I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin." And he recovered. Contemporary medical research is discovering links between our mental, physical and spiritual health. This does not mean your primary care physician is likely to prescribe prayers of confession for what ails you. That would be akin to prescribing a potion made with eye of newt. Nevertheless we know that confession and forgiveness bring emotional and spiritual healing. Having carried guilt over time before confessing and being forgiven, I can personally testify that it felt as though a physical burden had come off my shoulders. It would not surprise me in the least if the experience did good things for my blood pressure and heart rate. Stress kills. Guilt definitely causes stress.

We have neared the end of stewardship season. On previous Sundays I have talked to the church about money. Murray Pate spoke about it this morning. You will have received two letters asking for your financial pledges. Pledge Sunday rolls

around next week. Please make your pledges no later than next week's worship services. Now I will stop talking about money. Because stewardship truly does mean the faithful giving of **everything we have and are**. As today's bulletin insert tells us, "We are stewards of our time, talent, money, and other resources. We are stewards of forgiveness. We are stewards of possibility for individuals, households and larger communities." Have you ever thought of stewarding forgiveness? Hopefully we have set up this sermon in such a way that it now makes perfect sense to say that when we steward forgiveness—when we give instead of trying to hold onto it—life happens.

It would be impossible in a congregation of this size not to have friction between people who have not confessed it and forgiven each other. Note that David did not write, "Blessed is he who has never transgressed." He wrote, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven." Just as peace is far more than simply the lack of conflict, so is forgiveness far more than simply a source of peace. Forgiveness brings healing, healed relationships and healed spirits. Forgiveness brings life. And I confess to the church that I am a sinner. I sometimes forget to call Corrine Forree forward to give a minute for mission. I sometimes fake out Steve McCullough. If you are sitting there thinking, "Well, gee, those aren't very big sins," I say that to some people, these things seem avoidable and it angers them. So I truly confess that I am a sinner in these and many other ways. I ask your forgiveness.

You have mine.