

“How Often Should I Forgive?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 17, 2017

Matthew 18: 21-35

This summer, our family didn’t go on an exotic vacation. We didn’t even go on a regular vacation. When someone asked me where I went on vacation this summer, I replied, “My kitchen.”

That’s because the major project at our house this summer was to renovate our kitchen. From the day we moved into our house seven years ago, we knew this needed to be done. The kitchen had not been updated in forty-plus years. The cabinets were old, falling apart, and gross. It was dark, cramped, and frankly, it was the armpit of the house. But, as with all major renovation projects, we needed time to save up money to complete it. And I wanted to get this done this year, before we faced six consecutive years of college tuition payments!

As you will see, it was a total gut-job. We all got in on the work of demolishing the walls, floors, ceiling, and cabinets. I was deeply proud of the girls for jumping right in and working tirelessly alongside us. I was incredibly grateful to Debbie, who single-handedly assembled all the IKEA kitchen cabinets the week the girls and I were on the youth mission trip to Ferguson, Missouri. I was deeply grateful to my parents for spending a week and helping us install the cabinets and trim and basically getting us back into a usable kitchen seventeen days after we started. And I was humbled by the skill and craftsmanship of the plumber, the electrician, and the drywall installers who did beautiful work in an amount of time that still befuddles me.

Did everything go smoothly? Oh no. Trust me. I have decided that whatever timeline you think a project like this is going to take, add about twice that amount of time. For instance, while we got the kitchen back in working order pretty quickly, it wasn’t until last week that we got the new countertops installed – twice as long as they had planned.

Whenever I have worked on a major home improvement project, there always seems to be a moment that brings me to my knees, and I just want to quit – or cry – or both. This time, that moment was laying the floor tile. I was trying to meet a pretty tight deadline, as I juggled the schedules of the drywallers, plumber, and electrician. I knew that the tile floor needed to be completed by a certain date, and everything had to go smoothly to make the timeline work. I started laying the tile one morning, and it was taking longer than I had planned. I ran out of thinset mortar – the material that adheres the tile to the floor – and I went to Home Depot to get more bags. Only when I got there and looked at the bag which I had been using, I discovered I had used the wrong type of

thinset. I should have been using another type of mortar for the application I was using.

I stood in that aisle of Home Depot and was filled with a combination of anger and despair. I was angry with myself for not being more careful, for rushing to meet a deadline and not paying attention to the details. I was full of despair because I knew that the six hours of work I had put in that day was all for not. I felt like I had let my family down, because we were all tired of living off of paper plates and plastic cups and washing dishes at a neighbor's house. I think I cried all the way home.

What I was met with when I returned home was not anger and judgment, but forgiveness and grace. Debbie, Erin and Heather did not berate me for screwing up - instead, they asked what they could do to help. All four of us spent the rest of the evening pulling up those previously-installed tiles, bringing them outside, and washing all the old thinset off. And in the meantime, I learned that the plumber could not come until three days later to do his final work. I think God had a hand in that, too.

While we still have some finishing touches to complete, as you'll see the kitchen is mostly complete. We are thrilled beyond words with how it has turned out, and Erin has already said that she wants her graduation open house to be at our house, so I'm sure many of you will see it in person next year! But I will tell you, every time I look at and walk across that kitchen, tile floor, I will always remember being forgiven - and the reality of God's grace.

To be forgiven is a remarkable thing. It catches us off-guard, and turns us in a new direction. It restores stability where there had been insecurity. Hope replaces despair. A favor is granted which is beyond measure. To be forgiven is a remarkable, transformative thing.

Jesus uses a parable to help us understand the depth of forgiveness that God grants to us. A slave owed his king ten thousand talents. That is the equivalent of 150,000 years' wages of one laborer (18:24). In other words, it was an amount that could never be repaid - certainly not in an individual's lifetime. The king's first reaction is to have the slave sold, along with his family and his possessions, so that the debt might be settled. But it is the slave's pleading which changes the king's mind: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (18:26). And with that, forgiveness is granted; the debt is forgotten; the slave's life is spared.

It would be great if that was the end of the story. Then we wouldn't have to think about how we will respond to a friend who wrongs us. Then we wouldn't have to worry about how "being forgiven" changes our relationships with our fellow brother and sister.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. The forgiven slave, even before he has left the king's courtyard, finds a man who owes him the equivalent of a hundred days' wages. That man pleads in the same manner as the forgiven slave had: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But there is no mercy; there is no patience; there is no transformation on the forgiven slave's part. There is only a selfish, limited view of the world, and judgment is substituted for grace.

This is not acceptable behavior for the king, and it is not acceptable behavior for our God. The end to this story is brutal - in its honesty and in its violence. The king will not stand for someone to refuse to give mercy to another when that one has been forgiven himself. And the lesson is brutal: God will not stand for us to live by one set of rules for our neighbor, and another - more gracious - set of rules for our God. There is only one set of rules that apply: forgive one another, as you have been forgiven. That is our call as citizens of the Kingdom, and our mission to a broken, violent, hurting world.

Forgiving from your heart means letting go of grudges that have lost their foundation over so much time. It means ending an argument with your spouse or child before it is time to go to bed, and letting love replace anger in your heart. It means realizing that it takes more energy to remain angry with someone than to let it go and move on.

Forgiving from your heart means having a long, clear memory of forgiveness offered to you. It means reflecting on those who have shown you grace, and returning thanks to God for returning you to wholeness in that way. It means changing your first instinct of, "I can't believe you did that!" to "Don't worry about it."

Of course, this whole discussion on forgiveness begins with Peter. I love Peter. He's the disciple who always seems to be speaking for us. And in this case, I feel like I've said his words so many times to God. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" In other words, what's the minimum here, Jesus? What is the bare minimum that I have to put out to show I am one of your followers? And then he puts a number on it: "As many as seven times?"

How often have we said those exact words? "How often do I have to forgive? Can I put a number on it? After someone has wronged me and hurt me and betrayed me not just once, not just twice, but multiple times, innumerable times, can't I say that the forgiveness quota is filled, Lord? Can't I just put a lid on grace? I'm tired of being taken advantage of. I'm tired of being wronged. I'm tired. Can't I turn my back and walk away?"

I'll tell you, I may be a pastor, but there are times that it's hard for me to forgive. It's hard for me to forget how someone has treated me unfairly. It's hard for me to let go of the painful words someone has spoken in my direction. Perhaps you're like me. Perhaps you too have a

long memory of the painful moments in your life, the wounds that don't seem to heal, the grudges that we build up like walls, thinking they will protect us from further pain.

Really, Lord, how often do I have to forgive?

When I start down that path, maybe I need to go back into my kitchen. When I start down that path, maybe I need to stand on that tile floor and remember the grace I was shown. When I start down that path, maybe I need to sit on that tile floor and remember that in a moment when I felt broken because I had let someone else down, I was made whole through the unmerited grace extended to me.

When you start feeling tired of offering forgiveness, and you want to place a cap on grace, what's your tile floor? Where do you need to go in your past to remember how someone has forgiven you? Is there an object, a space, a song, a word that recalls that past grace shown to you? What reminder do you need to break down the walls of grudges and open yourself up to reconciliation?

There is no limit on the forgiveness we are called to offer to one another. Because there has been no limit placed by God on his forgiveness shown to us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

"How often should I forgive, Lord? As many as seven times?"

"Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

At least.

Thanks be to God. Amen.