

Matthew 18:21-35 *The Training Wheels of Forgiveness*
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Al
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21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

When I was about six, my mother bought me my first bike. I was very excited. I hopped on to ride, but of course, I fell. And it hurt. I tried a couple more times, but I kept falling, and kept getting hurt, so that was it. The bike just sat there. Finally, though, my mom was going on a trip, so she dropped my brother and me off with my grandparents for a week, along with the bike. My grandfather asked me why I

hadn't learned to ride, yet. When I told him it was because I didn't like falling and hurting myself, he went right out and got me some training wheels. This is why we all need grandparents!

With the security of those training wheels to catch me when I tipped too far, I had the courage to hop back on. By the time my mom got back from her trip, the training wheels were off, and I was riding like a pro.

It's hard to try new things, especially when we're afraid of getting hurt. The hurt can be physical, like falling off of a bike, or it can be the emotional pain of feeling stupid, or of having people shame us or make fun of us. When I was taking my daughter on college visits, I remember asking one admissions counselor what set their students apart. She said, "I think people would say about our students that they are really good writers, and that they're not afraid to try something even if they might not be good at it." I was so impressed—with both of those things, but the second one, in particular—not afraid to try something even if they might not be good at it! We live in an environment where, if you don't get an A, you've failed! So, too many kids won't take classes in which they might not excel, even if the subject might expand their understanding of the world. It's as though grades are more important than learning.

Of course, the problem isn't just internal—there's a reason for our reluctance to put ourselves out there. We live in a culture of shame. People love to point fingers in blame or ridicule, and any mistake we make can live forever on the internet. There's no room for trial and error. But if there's no room for trial and error, then there's also no room for growth.

Think of the learning curve we've been on as a congregation, just in the last couple of years. As a new, More Light congregation, many of us have had to learn just what all the letters in LGBTQI+ mean, and then get our heads around the concept of using different pronouns—those are the sorts of things we're bound to mess up on, especially if someone we've always known by one pronoun, lets us know that actually, their preferred pronouns are different. That takes a while to remember, and if there were no space to ask “wrong” questions, or no forgiveness when we inevitably slip up, those relationships would simply end. So, I can't tell you how proud I am about your willingness to ask those questions and learn, and then to slap on those pronoun buttons so that any person of any gender identity can feel at home here.

The same is true with issues of race. At a recent anti-racism training I attended, one of the participants noted: “We have to look at life as a series of learning opportunities, rather than failures or mistakes.” Amen.

Because what would happen if we ridiculed a child every time they made a grammar error, or shamed them for missing a math problem? It would just make them fear school and avoid those subjects.

Fear shuts down learning. Ridicule squelches risk-taking. Certainly, we've all experienced that. But Jesus offers something that might give us the courage to change that pattern. What he offers is forgiveness.

“How many times should I forgive a member who hurts me?” Peter asks. “As many as seven times?”

“Not seven times,” Jesus answers, “but seventy-seven times.” Then he tells the parable about the king who forgives his servant a debt so huge that one commentator describes it as “exceed[ing] the national debt of a small country.”¹

The man in the parable had messed up big-time, but he was given the chance to start fresh.

We all need that, don't we? Every week we ask God “to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Forgiveness—that grace that is extended to us over and over—is the training wheels of spiritual life. It's what allows us to hop back up, dust ourselves off, and try again.

¹ Audrey West, “Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35” (in “Preaching this Week, September 13, 2020” on *Working Preacher*), https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4570.

In these early days of this school year, every student, teacher, and parent is being forced to try something new and different—how to juggle teaching and learning and parenting in the dangerous world of covid. Having to master new methods of technology, *and* keep track of the different ways the virus can spread, *and* manage work life and home life, *and* try to convey or absorb actual subject matter.

Everyone in this scenario is going to make some mistakes. Everyone is going to get off balance. This is a time to be very, very forgiving with yourself.

And this is also a time to be very, very forgiving with one another. Because there's a second part to the parable, just as there's a second part of that phrase from the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*"

In the parable, the same man who is forgiven that massive debt, goes on to encounter another person who owes him a very small amount, but it's still more than that person can pay. Fresh from his own relief at having received the forgiveness he needed, we expect the man to do the same for this person—but no. He has the person thrown into prison. When his master hears what has happened, he rescinds the grace he had extended the man, and has him punished severely.

Apparently, that is the one mistake we can't afford to make—the mistake of failing to extend to others the grace that we, ourselves have received.

Just as with last week's reading about how to approach one another when we've been hurt, how to listen, and how to stand with one another as witnesses, this passage refers specifically to the kind of community Jesus wants us to have within the church. Peter's question is about how many times to forgive another *member* when they've wronged us. Seventy times seven is the answer. Seven is the number of completeness. Jesus is telling us to form a community of perfect forgiveness toward one another. What makes it perfect is when it is reciprocal—Because that's what gives us the courage to take the risks we need to take, if we're going to learn and grow.

Like those training wheels. They gave me the courage to keep trying. Yes, when I first started, I would tip too far to one side or the other. I would wobble. I would run off of the sidewalk. But the training wheels kept catching me, and keeping me from real injury. So I kept working at it until I got the hang of riding.

That's what forgiveness is for. Not to give us permission to stay the same and never get better; but to give us the courage to keep trying. To learn new things. To grow as human beings and as followers of Jesus.

Think what a difference it would make in our relationships and in our world if, instead of rejecting or shaming each other whenever we did something wrong, we

forgave each other and encouraged each other. If, instead of catching each other *out*, we simply *caught* each other. Before we fell too far. Before we got too hurt.

To be a human being is hard. To be a follower of Jesus is even harder. None of us is born knowing how to do either one. But we learn. We learn by trying and failing and trying again. We can do this because God is there to catch us.

And we can do this because we are there to catch one another—forgiving as we have been forgiven.

Because we *have* been forgiven—more than we can measure. Seventy times seven doesn't even begin to touch it.

So, the training wheels that we have been given, we need to pass on; so that this life, which can be so terrifying, can become a joy ride—one that we share with others.

Together, we can brush off our failures, hop back on, and speed off into the future; with the Son in front of us, the wind of the Spirit at our backs, and our friends by our side, all of us, cheering one another on, as we live and learn and grow. Thanks be to God.

