

The Unforgiving Servant
A reflection on Matthew 18:21-35
By Cathy Warner

My husband and I ate dinner Friday night, like most of you, tucked inside the house with the air quality index hovering at an unhealthy 270 outside, a blanket of eerie orange-gray smoke obscuring the view out the window with the sun setting like a full harvest moon we could look directly at. He asked me if I'd written my sermon yet. My answer was no.

It's been three weeks since I stood here and delivered a message, three weeks where I'm still obsessed with fire. Fire that thankfully spared my sister's cabin, but fire that claimed both my sister-in-law's homes. Fire that has led us to the task of trying to remember and document every item destroyed by flames in order to collect insurance payments so that my surviving sister-in-law, who now lives with us, can take steps to have her own home once again. Fire that makes it impossible, for now, to honor my deceased sister-in-law's wish to have her ashes scattered at Big Basin state park and her home, both decimated by flames.

Fire that consumes our western states, that upends lives, both human and animal. Fire that burned more than a million California acres in less than a week; fire that displaced half a million Oregonians as they evacuated; fire that left nothing of small towns in Washington but ash and memories; fire that makes the COVID-19 pandemic seem tame in comparison. Fire whose aftermath fills my dreams.

My husband asked what I was preaching about, and I told him about Peter asking Jesus if he should forgive 7 times, and how Jesus answers with either 77 or 70 times 7 times, depending on the translation.

"So, you're going to offer the best way to keep track?" he joked, conjuring images of the tick-marks we all learned to use for counting big numbers as kids: 4 straight lines, then the fifth at a diagonal. Thankfully our translation tops out at 77, instead of 490.

If we took Jesus literally, how would you track forgiveness? Would you keep a notepad in your pocket, an Excel spreadsheet on your computer, or better yet, invent a forgiveness app to track each offender and the number of their offense? Seventy-eight strikes and forgiveness is out—and something else is in. What's the response when it's not forgiveness? Unforgiveness? Revenge? Retaliation?

I know this isn't what Jesus meant, but I'm with Peter on this score. Seven seems like a more than generous amount of times to forgive others for their wrongs against us, especially back then when "an eye-for-an-eye" justice was a vast improvement over "your-whole-family -for-an-eye" justice that proceeded it.

Plus attempting to quantify our efforts at forgiveness offers some certainty and assurance for those of us, like me, who default to keeping track of such things as a placebo faced with our inability to control human behavior, and life itself.

Twice a day I receive an email from a CZU Lightning Complex Incident Update from CalFire as I await word of when the evacuation order will be lifted so that my surviving sister-in-law can return in person to what was once her home and see if anything remains. Highlights of yesterday morning's report read like this:

Incident start date: August 16, 2020. Incident start time: 6:41 a.m.

Incident type: Wildfire. Cause: Lightning
Size: 86,509 acres Containment: 86% Expected Full Containment: TBD
First Responder Fatalities: 0 First Responder Injuries: 0
Civilian Fatalities: 1 Civilian Injuries: 1
Structures Threatened: 7,647 and approximately 1,697 people evacuated
Residences Destroyed: 925 Residences Damaged: 90
Assigned Resources:
Engines: 36 Water Tenders: 1 Helicopters: 1 Hand Crews: 19 Dozers: 0
Total Personnel: 783

Cooperating Agencies: County of Santa Cruz, County of San Mateo, California
Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, American Red Cross, California Highway
Patrol, California Conservation Corps, PG&E, California State Parks, CAL OES, Bureau of
Land Management, California Army National Guard, Ben Lomond Fire Protection District,
Felton Fire Protection District, Boulder Creek Fire Department.

I find all these facts comforting. In the earliest days when containment was 0% when no one knew how many structures were damaged or destroyed, when the number of firefighters was woefully inadequate, when 60,000 people were evacuated, watching live briefings that accompanied the written reports gave me solace and hope.

Calamities, I think, are easy forgive. Firefighters were already stretched thin across California when 12,000 lightning strikes hit the state in less than 3 days. They fought valiantly to save what they could. It's hard to take any of that personally; though when we look beyond our specific loss, we look to blame, and perhaps rightly so, decisions we've made as governments and as a species that have led to this destructive new normal of extreme weather disasters.

In September 2017 a 15-year-old boy threw a smoke bomb into Eagle Creek Canyon on the Columbia River Gorge that burned an area the size of Washington D.C. He was sentenced to 1,920 hours of community service, 5 years of probation, and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of damages caused totaling \$36.6 million; an amount the judge conceded he'd never be able to pay, but an amount, that many people felt was fitting given the law and his deliberate act that destroyed such a beautifully iconic place.

The slave in Jesus' parable also owes an astronomical debt he can never repay. Ten thousand talents. A talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and would take a laborer around 15 years to earn. Which means that the slave owes the king the equivalent of 150,000 years of labor; something clearly impossible. We don't know he managed to rack up such a debt – and I suspect that the king has loaned him money in the past, time and again. I also suspect that the slave has promised to make payment, time and again. But even selling the slave along with his household and possessions, as was the king's right, wouldn't satisfy the debt.

We don't know what the slave said as he pleaded, but we know that the king forgives his debt. It's wiped clean. And as listeners on this side of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we understand that we ourselves have been forgiven an impossible debt through Jesus' sacrifice.

One would think that being forgiven an impossible-to-pay debt ought to change a person's behavior. The king assumed it would change the slave who owed many lifetimes of wages. But instead, that slave encounters another slave who owes him a hundred denarii; the wages garnered from a hundred days of labor – no small debt – but still manageable.

Rather than offering the forgiveness that's been given to him, the forgiven slave throttles the other and throws him in debtor's prison.

On first reading, I'm shocked by his behavior, but on second reading when I place myself inside this story, I see how predictable and common this behavior is. I know that I don't want to be held accountable for all my actions, especially those that harm others, especially when the harm is unintentional. I want forgiveness and I'm not above begging for it. On the other hand, I want others to be held accountable. I want them to suffer the consequences of their actions. Suffer being the operative word.

I wrote a poem once in response to Mary Oliver's opening lines of her poem "Wild Geese." She wrote: *You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.*

I continued:

But that's what I want you to do.

I want you to crawl across the desert
to my door, your knees bloody
your lips cracked.

Fall at my feet
grovel while I glare.

Beg for mercy.

Beg for forgiveness.

Prove to me, every day in every action
for the rest of your wretched life
that you are excruciatingly sorry--

tormented and miserable, aware of exactly
what you did
(every detail) to betray me.

You have committed the unpardonable sin
the one thing

I will not forgive.

You can try though, to eek it from me,
the forgiveness that will wet
your parched mouth.

I will stand vigil at my door
a cool glass of water
in my grasp.

I will shade my eyes with my hand
and watch you

scrape
toward me.

You, hungering for benediction,
thirsting for a blessing--

you will walk on your knees
toward me
repentant for a lifetime.

In the poem, I relished my unrepentance, my revenge, my desire to have someone grovel. A fantasy response to all the times I felt wounded.

Growing up, we are all subject to the failings of those who raised us, of things they don't even remember, careless words, snap decisions, that leave marks. And many of us have to cope with how to forgive larger wounds inflicted by divorce, abuse, addiction. As a child, I experienced forgiveness as a weapon held over my head. Behave appropriately or meet with disapproval and punishment, which felt like the withdrawal of love. In turn, for decades I tallied slights like ammunition, ready to wield forgiveness, or threaten its withholding as my own weapon against pain. I can tell you now, it was an ineffective strategy.

The Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt asks how Jesus's words "preach" in a world where his words have too often been used to justify the acceptance of domestic violence, and "in a world where we too often feel the need to 'get even' with those who are utterly unrepentant in how they have wounded us, and forgiving would seem like letting go of the last bit of power we were holding on to."

Her words, I think apply particularly to our dysfunctional political system where we demonize anyone who disagrees with us. It's a situation that as a society we can't seem to extricate ourselves from, though it serves none of us well.

In other passages, Jesus makes clear he doesn't come to abolish the law, rather he comes to fulfill it.

So perhaps forgiveness isn't an either / or that allows someone to get away with anything; but a both / and, where there is accountability along with forgiveness.

Jesus tells Peter, and us, to offer forgiveness uncountable times—because whether or not our translation equates to 77 times or seventy times seven times, both numbers mean we aren't supposed to keep track.

His parable also asks us to put ourselves in the place of each character: the one offering forgiveness, the one asking for forgiveness and receiving it, the one asking for forgiveness and being denied it.

That's probably not a big stretch for most of us. I've forgiven my husband and children, sometimes more easily than others. I've both asked for and received their forgiveness, also sometimes more easily than others. Outside of my nuclear family, where distance allows me to fester in my own perceptions, I've held onto my woundedness and a spirit of unforgiveness for far too long. In my unforgiveness, I've been outraged that the person I wasn't forgiving didn't seem to be suffering because of my withholding attitude.

They were living their life unchanged, and I was stewing inside, made miserable by my inability to forgive.

Jesus warns that we'll be tortured by our behavior unless we forgive our brother or sister from our heart. I remember as a child being forced to apologize to my little sister for things that I wasn't the least bit sorry for. I was certain she'd been the one who'd started it, whatever it was. I also believed, that it, whatever it was, was all her fault. But my parents and grandparents always insisted that since I was older (by 18 months) that I should know better. And so I delivered the required apology like this: I stood facing my sister, knees locked, crossing my arms over my heaving chest, eyes narrowed into a glare, chin jutting in defiant acquiescence as I said with all the venom I could muster, "I'm sorry," when what I really meant was, "I hate you."

Often, I was told to apologize again with the command to, "say it like you mean it." I toned down my outer vitriol, but my heart remained unrepentant.

In a household short on love, my sister and I both treated each other badly. We both needed to forgive the other, and eventually, as adults we were able to do that. But it was never some forced confession. It was a years' long process that allowed us to find the love beneath the hurt, disappointments, betrayals, and events, many of which were beyond our control.

For me, forgiving with my whole heart means that I needed to—and still need to—learn to forgive myself for the ways I hurt others, even as I endeavor to make amends for my actions. It doesn't mean there aren't consequences, but it means I have to learn that I'm still lovable despite my failures; it means I have to accept God's forgiveness and unconditional love in my own life before I can offer forgiveness to others and accept their forgiveness in return.

It's not easy, and there's no spreadsheet, app, or daily incident report that can help us navigate forgiveness. But we have Jesus's words to guide us; his wisdom in this parable, and some of his last words from the cross, "forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the midst of our inability to grasp the big picture, there is still good news for us. If God can forgive those who put to death God's beloved Son, and still stay in relationship with us, still keep wooing and loving us, then nothing is beyond God's capacity to forgive. And if nothing is beyond God's capacity to forgive, then there is hope for us, in our sin and cruelty to each other, both purposeful and accidental, to find true power and reconciliation in forgiveness. May it be so for us all.