

## ***“More Than You Know”***

*Matthew 18:21-35*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 9, 2014

I want you to think for a moment about something that you would consider unforgivable. What could someone do to you that you would have a very hard time forgiving? I think if we tried to make a list, at the top of that list would be hurting children. When someone harms a child our sense of justice is offended and rightly so. I think that's why we are so outraged by these recent school shootings or the death of the two young girls a couple of weeks ago here in Corpus Christi.

On October 2, 2006, 32-year-old Charlie Roberts barricaded himself in a one-room Amish schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pennsylvania where he killed five young Amish girls and wounded several more before turning his gun on himself. It seems to me that it would take a long time before I would be ready to forgive. Charlie Roberts' family felt the same way. His father Chuck, who is a retired police officer in the area, kept saying over and over, "I will never be able to face my Amish friends again."

But their Amish neighbor Henry had a different story. He said, "Roberts, we love you. We don't hold anything against you or your son. We're a forgiving people." The Amish community reached out to Chuck and Terri Roberts on the night of the shooting and the days that followed. They assured the Roberts that they had forgiven them. Some of the family members of the victims attended Charlie's funeral. Because of the forgiveness offered by her Amish neighbors, Terri Roberts has been able to forgive her son herself. She said, "I realized if I didn't forgive him, I would have the same hole in my heart that he had. And a root of bitterness never brings peace to anyone."

Today Terri Roberts shares that message with other people hoping to help them to forgive. She also does something surprising. Every Thursday she cares for 13-year-old Rosanna King, the girl who is the most

seriously injured survivor giving the parents a break.

Today's passage comes immediately after Jesus' instructions on what to do if a fellow believer sins against us. He says that we are to go talk to the person alone and share our concern. It may be that there's simply a misunderstanding. Or it may be that the person will be humble enough to listen to you and the relationship will be healed. If not, Jesus says to take along other people who were witnesses. Finally, Jesus says, if it's a serious matter then you must take it to the elders of the church.

Now Peter asks a question. He says, "How many times should I forgive? Up to *seven* times? The Jewish rabbis at the time had a saying that you must forgive someone three times. Peter seems to understand that being a follower of Jesus means having a higher standard. So he says up to seven times. As usual, though, Jesus changes the whole course of the discussion, showing Peter that he's asking the wrong question. Jesus replies, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." Some versions say seventy times seven. The point is the same either way. We are to forgive more times than we can count.

Jesus then illustrates what he's saying with a parable. Remember that parables are stories that come out of real life in order to make a moral or religious point. Some of the elements of this parable seem impossible to believe and that's the point. He's not telling about history, he's teaching.

He says, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." Jesus uses that image more than once in the gospels. The Bible is clear you and I are each accountable to God for our thoughts, words and actions. Whenever we do something or say something or think something that is outside of God's laws we are incurring a debt to him. That's why in the

Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to say, "forgive us our debts."

In this parable the man owes a very large debt to the king. Verse 24 says that he owed ten thousand talents. A talent in those days was a type of money. It was actually a standard weight and so it was used to measure gold and silver, among other things. A talent weight about 75 pounds, so 10,000 talents of gold would be twelve million ounces. Another way to look at it is that one talent was worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius was typically one day's wages. Either way, Jesus is trying to say that the man owed the king more than he could ever hope to repay. In today's economy it would be in the billions or maybe trillions of dollars.

I love the servant's response. Just give me more time. I promise to pay it all back. How often do you and I do the same thing? We go to God and try to make a deal. We bargain with God about our sin. Maybe we think it's not that bad. "I'm not as bad as *some* people." Sometimes God has to confront us with our sin. He brings us face to face with it. We come to realize how bad off we really are. No matter how hard we try, we could never repay the debt we owe to God. Our only recourse is to fall on our knees and pray for mercy. This is where many of us truly experience salvation and God's presence.

Instead, in the parable the king, who represents God, simply forgives the debt. He wipes the slate clean. Because of Jesus and his death and resurrection, our debt is cancelled. We are forgiven. We would think this was a great parable if Jesus had stopped there. But he didn't. He then tells how the servant who was forgiven billions of dollars in debt then encounters a fellow servant who owes him money, a hundred denarii. That's about 4 months wages. It's also a lot of money but it's virtually nothing compared to the billions that were just forgiven. He demands that his fellow servant pay him immediately. This servant uses almost the exact same phrase to ask for mercy.

But no mercy is coming and he has his fellow servant put into debtor's prison until he's paid. Needless to say, when the king hears about this he's not happy. He summons this servant and says, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. You should have shown the same mercy to your fellow servant." And he has the man thrown into prison. At this point Jesus says what we may wish he hadn't said: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." In some way *our* forgiveness is tied to our forgiveness of *others*. Jesus has already said when he gave the disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

So what does this forgiveness look like? Does this mean that if someone repeatedly hurts me I just have to roll over and take it? Not exactly. But as you heard Jesus say, we must be willing to forgive. Let's start with a couple of definitions. First, seminary professor Archibald Hart says, "forgiveness means surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me." Another way of looking at it is that forgiveness is giving up the hope or desire for a better yesterday. We cannot change the past and as long as we dwell on those things, we imprison ourselves to the unchangeable past.

So what about the person who repeatedly sins against us? Well we must still forgive him "from the heart." As a follower of Christ we cannot do less than that. Remember that while on the cross in terrible pain Jesus said, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He also told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We also know from the Bible that God loved us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). We should in turn love others who are also sinners. But that doesn't mean we don't take the steps to make sure it doesn't happen again.

The primary message here, though, is that if you are a follower of Christ, God has wiped out your huge debt. As a result we are to forgive

each other when we hurt one another. Any time you have a group of people together, someone will get hurt by another. We should all be slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Finally, the reason that our forgiveness is tied to the way we forgive is because our willingness to forgive is evidence of our

conversion. Like the Amish families who forgave Charlie Roberts' family, we should be known as "forgiving people." So what about you? Why not forgive today the people who have hurt you. I think you will find that *you* are the one who is set free.

*Amen*