

Open Hands of Forgiveness Matthew 18: 21-35

Would y'all pray with me? Loving God, we come to you with open hearts and open hands to the ways you are working in our lives, both seen and unseen, both known and unknown. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be good and pleasing to you. Amen.

Well good morning, Park Ridge Community Church! It is so good to be here with you in worship this freezing spring morning. My name is Pastor Maddie and, a little bit about me, I am in my final semester of seminary at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary out in Evanston. I already missed the deadline for ordering my cap and gown so please keep me in your prayers as I crawl to the finish getting this Master of Divinity. I am also a youth director out in Barrington and West Dundee, and had the joy of learning and growing with Pastor Carol before y'all installed her *cough cough* took her from me. No bitter feelings. No, but truly I have loved hearing about the incredible ministry that's come in the short time that Pastor Carol has been here, and all that God has in store for y'all in the future, so thank you for letting me join in a bit of it this morning.

I am originally from Overland Park, Kansas, and I am in the process to become ordained as an elder in the United Methodist Church in the Great Plains. For those who are curious, yes I do know I'm not in Kansas anymore and no I do not live on a farm. I grew up in a Methodist megachurch just outside of Kansas City, and at the time, I really loved the anonymity of walking into our 20,000 member church... of course my family came just after the passing of the peace (we didn't love the awkward mingling with strangers) and left quickly after the benediction to enjoy Free Cookie Sunday at our favorite sandwich shop. However, sometimes, my senior pastor found unique ways to disrupt this anonymity, and I did. Not. Love. It.

One tactic he did in particular was just after his sermon, he would ask us to rest our hands on our laps, palms up, as a posture of openness for a prayer before God and this massive church. At the time, I think I attributed this discomfort to not liking being told what to do, which maybe was part of it... but, I think truthfully the reason I felt so uncomfortable was because of the vulnerability that this posture of openness required: to sit transparently before God and a great cloud of witnesses praying about the stirrings in my heart, ruminating on the mistakes I wished to bury, contemplating the hurt I tried to trivialize, and realizing the forgiveness I needed to ask for and to administer.

When Pastor Carol told me that this week we were exploring forgiveness, the part of the Lord's Prayer saying "*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*," this posture of openness, of both hands open, kept coming to mind. And more specifically, the children's game "Down by the Banks" kept coming up. **As we saw in the Children's Sermon earlier, this understanding of forgiveness seen in the Lord's Prayer is dynamic and relational, where one hand is open to asking and receiving forgiveness from God in order to pass the other hand on to forgive others.

******For those of you who aren't familiar with this game, how you play is each person opens their two hands and places them on top of one another, the right hand rests on top and the left hand supports on the bottom. You sing a silly song and pass your hand around, and it becomes a game of hot potato where whoever gets stuck with the final clap at the end of the song is out.

The dynamic relationship between the openness of each hand was striking to me in light of this theme of forgiveness. In the game, in order to receive the hand of another, it requires you to open your hand to it. And you cannot pass your hand along to the next person until you do so. Just like the understanding of forgiveness seen in the Lord's prayer... we have to be open not only to asking for but to receiving the gift of forgiveness from God in order to go and do likewise and pass off this forgiveness unto others.

While this game and understanding of forgiveness seems simple, I think all of us know that forgiveness is really complicated. And truthfully, the church has, throughout history, done a bad job of naming how complicated it really is. And I think we do ourselves and our Christian story a disservice when we keep it simple.

In our Scripture text for today from eighteenth chapter of the book of Matthew, we see one of the many instances of Jesus explaining the kingdom of God in the form of a parable. He describes a story of a king and a servant and each of their understandings of forgiveness of debt to his disciples and they are left to determine its meaning and impact in their lives as they seek God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Although, if you noticed, the very end of this particular parable for today draws the conclusion for us.

Verses 34 and 35 describe a very retributive God with the words *"and in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."* Some scholars believe that the actual parable of Jesus would have ended with the contemplative question found in verse 33 saying, *"Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"*

The addition of these two verses does two things. One, it reveals Matthew's agenda of describing the already and not yet of God's kingdom seen also in the Lord's prayer. We already have the unmerited grace of God, and yet we can still lose it in the final judgement. The judgement and urgency of these verses make more sense with this knowledge of this gospel writer's intentions. Second, in Matthew drawing our own conclusions for us, I think we lose some of the heart and message of this parable.

You see the parable paints a scenario of a servant, probably a subservient official to the king, who mismanaged the king's funds. This mismanagement turned into a debt of ten thousand talents, which is an exorbitant amount. Scholars say that this is more than the combined amount of all the taxes of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria for one year. Essentially, this debt is unpayable; it is unforgiveable. And yet, the servant still has the audacity to ask for

forgiveness and much to the surprise of him, and the reader, the king grants him with grace and freedom from debt.

As the parable continues, the amount of debt the second servant owes to this forgiven servant is microscopic compared to ten thousand talents. It isn't insignificant, a hundred denarii equated to about a hundred days' wages for a common laborer. Yet this amount articulates to the disciples, and to us as readers, that this debt is reasonable in contrast to ten thousand talents, it can eventually be paid, it can eventually be forgiven. The outrage of the fellow servants makes absolute sense, because the injustice and the lack of grace administered is not only unfair, but it breaks this dynamic and relational nature of forgiveness where with the servant's hand open to asking and receiving forgiveness for something UNFORGIVEABLE, he in turn should have been ready and eager to pass forgiveness along to his neighbor especially something quite forgivable.

But as I said before, while this parable seems simple, we know that forgiveness is complicated. I'm sure each one of us has stories upon stories of moments of betrayal, moments where someone you love disappointed you beyond measure, moments when a conversation went too far and lines were crossed, moments when empty apology after empty apology came but nothing changed about the situation, moments when someone who said they would always be there to support you leaves. I could go on and on, but given time, our own stories of pain and hurt come creeping to the surface, and forgiveness seems complicated.

Beyond this complicated reality, there are some transgressions, some sins, some debts that actually may add up to ten thousand talents, where the debt is unpayable, where the debt is unforgivable. I think of women and men who have endured abusive relationships from partners, I think of LGBTQIA+ youth who are kicked out of their homes by their own parents who refuse to see their sacred worth, I think of innocent children who have been abused by priests while leadership knew and turned a blind eye. I think of the women who choose not to tell their stories of violation because the burden and cost is far too great.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu offers these words regarding the complication of forgiveness, saying "*the invitation to forgive is not an invitation to forget.*" Nor is it an invitation to claim that an injury is less hurtful than it really is. Nor is it a request to paper over the fissure in a relationship, to say it's okay when it's not. It's not okay to be injured. It's not okay to be abused. It's not okay to be violated. It's not okay to be betrayed."

And to add another layer to how complicated these open hands of forgiveness really are, when we say "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" this "collective we" is more than just me and you, but it's whole systems of injustice. I think of the earth crying out for healing when multinational companies continue wiping out forests and wildlife in the name of progress. I think of our Native siblings whose people and culture have been decimated in the name of Christianity over centuries, and who to this day cry "Mni Wiconi", "Water is Life," and are silenced in the name of oil and profit. I think of the black and brown lives disproportionately incarcerated as the prison-industrial complex operates as a modern manifestation of Jim Crow.

I think of the crowds at Golgotha who gathered around a 1st century, poor, Palestinian man and cursed him, and beat him, and taunted him, and watched as he hung from the cross of empire. During this season of Lent, we are called to turn and reorient ourselves back to the cross, and when it comes to forgiveness, personally and collectively, it's complicated, it's vulnerable, frankly it's quite terrifying to open our hands to asking and receiving such grace when the debt seems so great.

But on this very hill is exactly where the parable of the king's forgiveness comes to life. On this very hill the complicated nature of forgiveness is explained. On this very hill the simple child's game of "Down by the Banks" is modeled; because we see Jesus with open hands from the cross cry "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." Pastor and theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that:

"At Calvary, God allows our human system of scapegoating, fear, and retaliation to play its natural course, which ends as it always does: in the suffering of God. And then in turn, God shows us God's system by not even lifting a finger to condemn those who put him on the cross, but instead proclaims, of all things, forgiveness. In doing so God cuts the world loose from our own sin because God can't stand to see us chained to it. At Calvary we see our God entering deeply into the suffering caused by human evil and saying this. ends. here. I will not transmit it. We are cut loose. God's forgiveness is like giant bolt-cutters. And then God says go and do likewise. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Cut others loose too. Jesus commands it. It's not actually a suggestion. He commands us to forgive just as he commands us to love."

I am under the impression, as Nadia Bolz-Weber names, that we cannot fully understand today's words of the Lord's Prayer "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" without the understanding of the Greatest Commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as our self. With open hands, we are called to forgive and we are called to love. We are called to be in a posture of openness to asking and accepting the unmerited grace of God, and to courageously asking for forgiveness of our neighbors we have harmed.

But it doesn't stop there; we pass our hand to the next person, because we are called to administer this very same, life-saving grace of forgiveness and love. Forgiveness and love that are made concrete in justice for marginalized communities, in prophetically proclaiming the truth of the cross, in courageously being willing to come alongside the Holy Spirit as she makes the parables of God's kingdom real.

One final complication, I believe strongly that this posture of openness, this reality of open hands of forgiveness and love does not work if we cannot also forgive ourselves. If we cannot truly be willing to receive the gift that God's grace is for everyone... including yourself, no matter what you've done, or who you've been, no matter the parts you don't like about yourself, the parts you try desperately to hide, no matter the debt... if we cannot be open to this gift of grace, then the game of forgiveness and love just doesn't work.

What ends up happening is that we close our hands and we play “down by the banks” with our fists balled up real tight, and we hurt others, and instead of administering forgiveness, we administer judgment, instead of administering love, we administer hate. This gift of grace, of forgiveness, of love is for you, it’s for me, it’s for us, it’s for our community, it’s for our nation, it’s for our world, it’s for the cosmos. We are called to receive it with open hands and go and do likewise.

I had the pleasure of traveling to the Holy Land a couple of months ago with my seminary, and one of my favorite moments was meeting with Father Elias Chacour who is a Palestinian Melkite priest. He spent a couple of hours talking with our group about his experience as a faith leader in an occupied state, and one story in particular really struck me which he also shares in his book “Blood Brothers.” Father Chacour was first appointed to the small Palestinian town of Ibillin and after the first year and a half he had tried without ceasing to unite the divided town fraught with family feuds and political hostilities.

On Palm Sunday, he decided to be bold and call out the deep division and hate plaguing their town. He not only proclaimed this, but at the end of the service, he chose to lock the doors of the church with a padlock chain, naming that he would not be able to unite them, only Jesus could. So he sat in that icy, tumultuous, terrifying space for five, ten, fifteen minutes of deafening silence, until one man decided to stand up. A man who was one of the most callous members to Father Chacour, a man who hadn’t spoken to his own brothers in years stood up and said, “I am sorry.” He first turned to Father Chacour and said, “Can you forgive me, Abuna?” which means father in Arabic. Father Chacour greeted him and said “of course I forgive you, now go and greet your brothers.”

The text continues saying, (pg. 175)

“..before [the man] was halfway down the aisle, his three brothers had rushed to him. They held each other in a long embrace, each one asking forgiveness of the others. In an instant, the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance. Cousins who had not spoken to each other in years wept together openly. Women asked forgiveness for malicious gossip. Men confessed to passing damaging lies about each other. People who had ignored the sisters and me in the streets now begged us to come to their homes. This second church service—a liturgy of love and reconciliation--went on for nearly a full hour. And loudly, I announced: ‘We’re not going to wait until next week to celebrate the Resurrection. Let’s celebrate it now. We were dead to each other. Now we are alive again.’ [...] The momentum carried us out of the church and into the streets where true Christianity belongs. At every door, someone had to ask forgiveness for a certain wrong. Never was a forgiveness withheld. Now I knew that inner peace could be passed from man to man and woman to woman.”

Now I promise I won’t lock y’all up and I promise I won’t call an early Easter, but as we prepare during these last three weeks of Lent, I hope that we may embrace this posture of openness. Openness to asking for forgiveness from God and others, openness to accepting the gift of grace beyond measure, openness that in turn causes a ripple effect where you pass off this

forgiveness and this love to others, openness that prepares us for the truth and horror of the cross and the hope and liberation of resurrection.

In the name of the One who loves us and forgives us unconditionally. Amen.