

Divine Contact Tracing (or Investing in Divine Grace)

September 13, 2020

In an episode of the hit show “The Big Bang Theory,” at one point the main character, Sheldon Cooper, references his list of mortal enemies which he started cultivating as a child. When we learn of the list, there are 61 people on it: 61 people who have crossed Sheldon, and whose transgression he has been carrying around ever since. The joke wraps up when Sheldon tries to reference his list, which he started so long ago that it is saved on a 5 ¼ inch floppy disk, the disk fails after all these decades, and he threatens to add the person who was working quality control at the Verbatim Corporation in 1989 on the list, as well.

It’s easy to hold grudges, not to forgive, to keep tabs on how we’ve been wronged. We laugh at the quirkiness of the show’s stable genius being unable to let go of the ways people have hurt him, but comedy is rooted in experience. We laugh because holding on to how people have wronged us often can hit pretty close to home.

I suspect that none of us has to work too hard to think of an example of holding on to a grudge. Often, couples will bring up old wrongs when they argue. Neighbors build fences or start petty turf wars because of a misunderstanding. Family members grow distant because of an unpaid debt. Friends become bitter because one regularly puts in more effort than the other. (If I haven’t yet named a type of grudge that you’ve held, it may be because you have an even more robust list.)

Sometimes, our grudges seem reasonable. I don’t like spending time with people who make racist or homophobic comments, so I avoid this dinner party or that gathering. Other times, they seem petty. Someone may not even remember why they cross to the other side of the street when they see their neighbor walking down the street. They just remember that they don’t want to talk to them.

In today’s Gospel, Peter asks Jesus, “How often should I forgive? Seven times?” Here, Peter thinks he’s being generous, even extravagant. Seven times!

In our world of “three strikes and you’re out,” it sounds like it gives plenty of time to make a change, to turn one’s behavior. But I can do just about anything seven times. It’s measurable. You can keep track of something you do seven times. Even if your memory is slipping, you can think it through and say, “Oh, that’s right! I was doing this when I forgave you” or “I remember now! I was sitting on the back porch and we were on the phone when you apologized.”

The image of contact tracing comes to mind. It’s easy to be able to trace back our steps if our contacts are limited, but the wider our bubbles become, the harder it is to keep tabs. It’s easy to keep track of forgiveness if we’re expected to offer it once or twice, if three strikes mean you’re out. It’s harder if we try to do as Peter suggests, and forgive seven times.

With everything we’ve been juggling with parenting a newborn while working full time from home, it’s hard for me to remember how often we’ve fed Josie. Did she eat at 11 a.m., or was today the day she just wasn’t interested in her bottle? Was this the day that she guzzled six ounces like it was nothing first thing in the morning, or was that yesterday? It’s a challenge to

keep track of how many bottles we've given her, but we're able to do it because it's a finite number, usually six or seven.

So when Jesus responds to Peter's extravagant suggestion, and tells us that we are to forgive "not seven times, but seventy times seven" our rightful response is "that would be impossible to keep track of, that would be impossible to trace!" If it's hard to remember what you had for breakfast, how in the world are you going to remember whether this is the 137th or 138th time you forgave someone? Exactly! In short, living a life rooted in God's values isn't about keeping track.

Reading this Gospel passage this year, I have to admit that there were some aspects that were troublesome. As so many of us are spending more time and energy learning about and working to dismantle systemic racism, Jesus telling a parable in which the character we presume to be the God-figure threatens to sell a slave and their family because of an unpaid debt feels jarring. This is one of those places where I am so deeply grateful to be part of a Christian tradition that reads the Bible dynamically, not literally.

We revere the Bible, find God's wisdom in its pages, while at the same time acknowledging it is a human construct as well. As the great Barbara Ried always said, "I believe in everything in the Bible...correctly interpreted."

One of the things this passage enlightens for us today is that the dynamic of power elites wrecking havoc in people's lives was just as systemically embedded in Jesus' time as it is today; that Jesus and the Gospel writers, for all of their dedication to liberation from oppression, still tell a morality tale based in such a destructive power dynamic tells us just how deeply embedded exerting power over others is in human society.

However, we are to remember the function of parables: they are symbolic stories – icons if you will – metaphors that help us to wrap our finite minds around the grace of God which is so much bigger and more complex than our human brains can comprehend. The point of the story has a divine function, even when the social dynamics within prove to be embedded in arcane social norms of its time. Like wheat being separated from chaff, we must sift out the divine wisdom from its culturally embedded hull.

In today's passage, that's easy. The violence of selling someone and their family is the culturally embedded hull. Once we set that aside, this parable yields unfathomable richness.

So let's dig deep into the text: First, we're told of a slave who owes the king 10,000 talents. Now, in Jesus' time, one talent was equivalent to roughly 6,000 days wages. It's a lot of money, over 16 years wages for a common person. So when we're told that the first slave owed the king 10,000 talents, they owed over 160,000 years of a laborer's wages—more than 60 million days wages, \$7.2 billion at \$15/hour.

This exorbitant number functions in two ways. First, and most obvious, it tells us that the king's forgiveness is incalculable. It is so vast that there is no way that it could ever be repaid. This number is supposed to communicate to us that the king's forgiveness is beyond comprehension. Additionally, it tells us that, though a slave, this first debtor is high up in the king's organization. You don't get to a place of owing 60 million days wages unless you're in a position of power.

Modern scripture scholars compare this character to a CFO—someone who doesn't own the company, but has vast wealth and power at their disposal. The parable goes that the CFO pleads for time to pay, and thus to spare their family, and the king not only does this but forgives the whole debt.

Extravagant forgiveness beyond human comprehension is one facet of the divine wisdom of this passage. But then we're told that later that day, the same CEO who was given extravagant forgiveness refuses to forgive a laborer whose debt is 100 days wages. Like Peter's suggestion that we forgive seven times, it's a lot, but it's measurable. This dynamic prompts Moravian theologian Audrey West to ask "Do we recognize the ways that we harm others, either in our interpersonal interactions or through the systems in which we participate? How might we become as aware of our own capacity to sin against others as we are of the capacities of others to sin against us?"

As a quick aside here, it's important for us to note that forgiveness does not equal condoning destructive behaviors, nor does it mean allowing someone to hurt us again. This is why, in this parable, Jesus chooses to highlight situations in which the forgiver stands in a position of power. Stay tuned for future sermons that explore forgiveness from other perspectives.

The easy take away from our Gospel today is that we need to forgive as we are forgiven. This is so central to a Christian life that we pray it every time we lift up the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." But, as Michael Lukens told us in my undergrad, he'd give us a C if we were able to regurgitate the information he'd shared, a B if we were able to analyse it, and an A if we were able to explore why it mattered. This parable of God's extravagance is about so much more than forgiveness.

As Stanley Saunders of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, GA points out:

"The economy of forgiveness Jesus announces is congruent neither with the values and assumptions that govern human economies nor the relentless pursuit of power and privilege that drives our daily social relationships. The pursuit of unlimited forgiveness requires a definitive break from the tacit arrangements that govern everyday life, whether ancient or modern...The parable illustrates with painful clarity the difficulty of practicing forgiveness in a social system built for different purposes...The king's stupendous act of mercy is, however, neither a private matter nor an act with consequences for this slave alone."

Friends, this is a parable of dismantling power systems that are built to give advantage to some at the expense of others. This is a parable for our time, a parable in which Jesus gives us a concrete, powerful tool for radically shifting our alliances from those of empire to those of God's beloved community.

Saunders continues:

"(The lack of forgiveness) demonstrates that the forgiven slave intends to revert to business as usual...The unforgiving slave binds himself not to the system of the king's mercy, but to the old system of wealth extraction and violence...The unforgiving slave brings judgment on himself by treating his own forgiveness as a

license to execute judgment on others. The problem lies with the world the slave insists on constructing for himself.”

And so, even bigger than the lesson to forgive as we have been forgiven, this parable prompts followers of Jesus to ask ourselves “With whom, and to what systems, do we bind ourselves each day? This question is critical as people ask me about why the church isn’t meeting in person, since the government says we’re allowed to. The answer is that our church has chosen to bind ourselves to Godly ways of health and working to protect the common good, rather than the ways of empire.

This question of to what systems do we bind ourselves applies as we assess police funding, teacher pay, and efforts to undermine free and fair elections. To what systems do we bind ourselves? Do we bind ourselves to getting ahead at all costs? She who dies with the most toys wins? The end justifies the means? OR, as people who have received abundantly from the divine, as creatures who have received so extravagantly from the Divine that there is no possible way we could ever count God’s blessings, God’s forgiveness, God’s hope, do we in turn bind ourselves to God’s ways of forgiveness and mutuality and building a system that works for everyone, not one in which I get ahead?

Friends, as we kick off our program year this ReUnion Sunday in such very different way than has become our custom, Jesus’ message of abundant forgiveness is important, but this question of which systems we ally ourselves is absolutely central. Our commitment to deep, meaningful, intellectually stimulating worship holds firm now more than ever. Our commitment to breaking down systems of injustice holds firm now more than ever. Our commitment to learning and growing and nurturing in the ways of God holds firm now more than ever.

We’re going to celebrate Communion shortly. (If you didn’t prepare some food and drink already, you may want to do so shortly.) It’s worth remembering that Communion is a radical commitment to God’s ways over the ways of empire. It’s a commitment to there being enough for everyone, a commitment to unearned grace, a commitment to healing and inclusion. While we can’t smell the pulled pork in the Nesco (roasters) wafting down the stairs from Pilgrim Hall, and all of the other rituals of our ReUnion Sunday are on hold, today’s Gospel implores us to recommit ourselves to God’s systems of forgiveness and grace. When we do so, we are Union now more than ever.

Alleluia, and amen!

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