

Generous Faithfulness 3

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Start today **thinking about a time recently you've had to have a hard conversation with another adult.** This could be a face to face conversation or potentially a virtual one. What was it like? What was the context? Who were the persons involved? Did you feel like they were peers or that one of you had more power than the other? What made it hard? Was it disagreement? Did the other person offend you in some way? How did it go? Were you able to navigate the conflict or offense or difficulty in a way that left you closer to the person or did you walk away feeling like there was more distance between you? Perhaps like relationship was gonna be harder now or perhaps needed to be abandoned altogether?
- B. Part way into a series on Jesus-centered faith that is fostered in community that is safe for a diverse group of people, and not defined by the idols of certain world views that obscure truth and obscure God. And part of this, as we have discovered since we've set off on this venture is that to pursue safety for a diverse group of people unto Jesus means we sometimes have some hard conversations. We inevitably find out that our diversity means that we have different perspectives on life and those perspectives come into conflict at times with one another. Sometimes that might leave us wondering if those conflicting perspectives mean that we don't actually belong here.
- C. **Brene Brown** - her recent book *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to stand alone*. Poignant part of the book when she talks to a group of middle school students about **belonging verses fitting in**.
 1. *"Belonging is being somewhere you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other."*
 2. *"Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else."*
 3. *"If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in."*
 4. How do we foster community where there is belonging for all, where none of us feel the need to "fit in"?
- D. This week, as we continue our series I want to focus on the first word in this series title **"Generous"**.
 1. **tend to think about this purely in financial terms.** Generous people give liberally of their finances. They pick up the tab at dinner. They give a significant portion of their income to church or to worthy organizations. They give nice gifts for birthdays or holidays. **But is that all that generosity entails?** Or is openhanded-ness with finances merely one way that expresses something more expansive and holistic in generosity?
 2. What might it mean for us to be generous with one another? To be a community that was relationally generous with those in our community, and all we encounter?
- E. Questions about how we regard one another were central to Jesus community as much as they are to ours. In fact, talking about how we relate to one another was something he spent a fair amount of time on. Today we're gonna take a fresh look at one of the stories he told on this theme and consider how it might give us some direction as we consider our own care for one another and what it could mean to be generous towards one another.

II. Matthew 18: 21-35

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. (Quick aside, there is some debate amongst scholars whether this phrase in Greek should be translated seventy seven or seventy times

seven...technically 490. Either way, doesn't matter. The point is its beyond counting.)

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.”

- A. We have a story that Jesus is telling about **economic debts; financial generosity and lack of generosity. But clearly for Jesus these financial transactions aren't the real point.** What Jesus is talking about goes beyond economic transactions. He's using the mundane and concrete of fiscal currency to point to something invisible but perhaps even more potent: **relational currency.**
- B. What do I mean by relational currency? Is that a helpful term?
1. The language we have here being referenced is **“forgiveness”**. We tend to think of forgiveness **not as an economic exchange but as a moral one.** To forgive is often understood in this vague sentiment of being nice to one another and not letting the way others have hurt our feelings keep us from connection. Forgiveness is what I'm **asking my kids to try to do** every day it would seem amongst one another as they say harsh words to one another or take each others toys. “Say ‘I’m sorry’”. Now say “I forgive you.” I don't think I'm alone in thinking of forgiveness in this way, or as a parent, in trying to teach it to my kids this way.
 2. But I also have to admit that **this sentimental understanding of forgiveness**, while perhaps helpful in me trying to help my kids not to be forever rude to one another, also **seems to break down at times.** Is this kind of forgiveness always necessary and even appropriate in our adult relationships?
 - a) This week in the news has been a further breaking of the dam in terms of the revelations of men of power using their power to sexually exploit others, often those who are particularly vulnerable because of their gender, their age, their lack of relative power in their professions, and so on. **As Christians who are called to forgiveness, how are we called to respond to the Harvey Weinstein, the Roy Moores, the Kevin Spaceys of the world?** For those of us who have been sexually assaulted or harassed ourselves, are we required by faith to “forgive” those who have harmed us?
 3. I think this **sentimental concept of forgiveness actually misses some of the force of the way forgiveness is actually spoken about in this story, and throughout the New**

Testament. Thinking about relationship as having its own form of currency might actually be more helpful. The scenario Jesus is describing in his parable is economic, but this is not the only place economic imagery is employed to discuss forgiveness. In fact, **the language of forgiveness itself in the New Testament is economic.**

a) If we were reading this story in Greek, again and again this story, and the setup Matthew gives us to it would feature the Greek verb ***aphiēmi***. *Aphiēmi* meant literally **“to release” or to “leave” or to “let go”**. Elsewhere in the New Testament it show up in other ways with this connotation.

(1) When Jesus says he has come to “release” the captives, this is the word he uses.

(2) When the fisher men Jesus calls to follow him decide to do so, the Gospel writers say they left their nets and followed him. Same word. *Aphiemi*.

(a) What does freeing the captives or leaving your nets have to do with saying “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you”? Clearly some deeper understanding is needed.

(3) The third common usage of this word in Jesus’ day gets more to the point and is exactly what we see illustrated in this story. **When a creditor cancels a debt that is owed to him, he can be said to “release” it.** To let it go. To *aphiemi* it. It’s an economic exchange in this case. *Aphiemi* is the release of a material possession or of financial currency, you could say. But as Jesus points out, the need for this kind of release and exchange is not only economic. **There is a relational currency that also at times needs to be released and surrendered.**

C. **The set-up for our story features a question asked by Peter**, the disciple whose often boldest in asking the question that likely is on all of their minds.

1. What we miss without broader context is that in Matthew’s arrangement of Jesus’ teaching, **Peter’s question is a response to something Jesus has just taught them. He’s just been teaching them how they are to resolve conflict within faith community,** if they find one of their own in sin, how they might address it. And this leads Peter to ask his question about forgiveness. How often is he to release the wrongs of his brothers and sisters?

a) **His suggestion of seven is a bit liberal.** Jewish tradition often held at the time that **forgiving another three times was sufficient.** But Jesus says even more than twice that is *insufficient*. The call to release another of debts is a call to countless release of relational currency. A call to **relationally abundant generosity.** The story that follows makes the point of why that generosity must come if we are to follow God. Why **faithfulness demands relational generosity.**

D. Examining the story itself, there are **two scenarios of release illustrated here.**

1. The first is between **the king and his slave.**

a) The King is settling accounts and a certain slave is brought before him who owes a significant amount. Now cultural distance makes it hard for us to understand how much money we’re talking about. It’s easy to miss the sense of this.

(1) **The story says that the slave owes the king 10,000 talents.** Now a talent itself was quite a lot of money. A denarius was a days wages for a day laborer. By today’s standard, let’s say minimum wage is around \$10, so a denarius would be about \$80. A talent was approximately 10,000 denarii, or \$800,000. What this man owes is 10,000 of those, or **\$8 Billion**. Basically, an astronomical amount of money. Who knows how he actually could have wracked up such a debt; the reality of it isn’t the point. **The point is how immense and unfathomable it is and how impossible it would be to pay such a debt back.** Even the solution that the King makes, to sell

the slave, his wife, their children would hardly have made a dent, though it was certainly deserved and within the king's rights to do.

- (a) **But when the man begs for patience, the king softens toward him.** No amount of patience is going to help this guy pay off his debt, despite what the debtor may claim. It's un-payable. It's ridiculous. But it does move the King to do something equally unfathomable. To release altogether such an immense debt. The generosity of that act would have blown the minds of the people Jesus told this story to.
- (2) So to, the twist that is about to come. **This man released altogether from a debt that is beyond reckoning is freed.** And rather than demonstrate generosity towards others with his new found freedom and the gift he's just received, he shows something totally different. It turns out this guy wasn't the only one in debt. Someone else owes something to him. Another slave owed him 100 denarii. Again, this would be about 100 days wages or \$8000. It's not a totally insignificant amount of money, likely all of us would feel a debt if \$8000, but it's completely nothing compared to a debt of \$8 billion. Many of us could figure out over time how to actually pay off the debt of \$8,000. The debt of 8 billion most of us never would.
- (3) **In the Greco-Roman world at that time, it was permissible to throw debtors in prison.** It was a way of trying to shake them down. And it could go either way. On the one hand, if the guys is in prison, how is he supposed to work off the debt? He can't. However, if he has some money he's squirreled away or is hiding in some private 1st century version of an off-shore account, throwing him in prison might make him more likely to bring that money forward.
- (4) Now it may have been within the slaves rights to throw his debtor in prison, but everyone who was familiar with what had just happened to this slave was understandably surprised. How could he squander this generosity? Sure, there had been no obligation; no contract with the King entered into whereby the slave had to release all his debtors. But the release, the forgiveness he had just experienced was more than economic and contractual. **Relational currency in the form of care, grace, generosity, compassion had been released toward him. They had not come to him because he deserved them.** They came because of the compassion of the giver. But that giver clearly hoped and expected that the relational currency released would make an impact on the slave who received it in a way beyond economics. That it would impact his character, his heart. That perhaps he would "pay it forward" as they say and share the relational currency he'd received.
- (5) When the word gets back to the King that that has not taken place, indeed quite the opposite, the King is livid. *'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'* Mercy is revoked.
- (a) **When hearing this the audience is invited to celebrate the king's justice.** *Ha ha, the unforgiving servant gets what he really deserved. Clearly the guy is a bum. First he wracked up this enormous debt and then when it was released, he went after someone else for a petty amount.*
- (b) **But in this moment we must take a step back and ponder what Jesus is provoking in his listeners here.** Is he really trying to say that God is this capricious, prone to give mercy in one moment and to strip it away the next if we don't prove ourselves worthy enough? What kind of cruel God is that? **Perhaps what's really worth examining is why we feel such glee in the**

torture of one we've judged to be bad. Could it be that our angry response toward the unforgiving debtor is a signal of our own challenge to release others, **our own judgmental, exacting, ungenerous regard of one another, rather than a spirit that is prone to release others of their debts?**

2. There's another important aspect about how Jesus perceives forgiveness that this story points to and beyond this the New Testament confirms. It might be easy to miss this so I want to highlight it

a) *Aphiemi*, (Release or forgiveness) is not applicable in all circumstances when one party wrongs another. **Dynamics of power are very much in play.**

(1) The world in which Jesus lived was extremely hierarchical. Relationships were arranged in which power was always being negotiated. The relationship between a master and his slaves, between a creditor and his debtors, both of these are power differentials. Interestingly, the forgiveness offered, the release encouraged here can only be performed by someone with more power, or potentially equal power to the other. Again and again, when Jesus describes people releasing one another, the release only goes one way. **The person with more power releases the one over whom they have power.** They choose not to exert their power over them for the person's harm. They choose not to throw them in prison. They choose not to exact the money from them that they are owed but which the person has no capacity to pay. **Only someone in a position of power, or at the most in a position of equality, has the ability and the requirement for Jesus to release someone of their debt, financial or spiritual.**

(2) I owe this point to the work of theologian **Frederick Keene**. Moving forward from this parable he points out this:

"The final example of humans forgiving humans within the gospels is also the only example that presents the question of one with less power forgiving those with relatively more power. It is Luke 23:34, (Then Jesus said, 'Father forgive (aphiēmi) them, for they do not know what they are doing.') one of the Last Words on the Cross. This is a situation where Jesus has no power; he is speaking from a cross about those who have crucified him. What is noticeable is that he does not forgive them. Instead, he asks his Father, he asks God, to forgive them. Having no power within the situation, he cannot forgive. About the only way the structures of power can be invoked for forgiveness is the way Jesus chose: to ask God, who remains all powerful, to forgive. This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not. He asked the strongest to forgive, and, being the less powerful, did not offer the forgiveness himself."

(3) **Why is this point important? Because this is where questions of mercy and justice in tension become relevant.** For those of us who are the victims of injustice, have been abused and are still in a relationship of less power than our abusers, for those who are actively oppressed and wonder if we are required to grant release to our oppressors, Keene would say forgiveness, release from debts, is not ours to give. **We don't have the relational currency to give it with.** It is not required of us, it is not even possible for us to extend it while the power dynamics remain imbalanced. A child might only possibly forgive her abusive father when she is an adult and he no longer has power over her.

(4) For someone in power to receive release from someone with less power that they have harmed, they must first relinquish power over them. **This, for Keene, is where**

repentance comes into play. Repentance literally means “turning”; “changing direction.” In terms of relational currency and forgiveness, the role of repentance is **surrendering power**. Only by giving up power over another, only by coming to the level of peer or possibly the level of less powerful, only by turning from power and submitting oneself to the judgement of others, can one receive release from judgement. And it is only when that happens that we, who have been wronged by those more powerful than ourselves are in a position to give it.

E. **So what are we to take from this story about fictional creditors and debtors? How is it supposed to inform our own practice of faith?** What does it all have to do with hard conversations we might have on Facebook or at church? About fitting in verses belonging?

1. The story invites us to consider God’s generosity towards us.

- a) Again, this goes beyond financial generosity. I’m fairly confident no-one in this room is gonna see anything like an 8 billion dollar debt miraculously wiped out. But what Jesus is inviting us to consider is that God’s extension of care for us, the relational currency God has extended us, the way our Divine Parent has released our faults, our weaknesses, our mistakes, our outright morally poor choices, our sins, all of it; that release is of immeasurable value. It’s beyond what we could ever even imagine repaying. It can only be received. It can only be experienced. But in the releasing of the debt and the receiving of the grace there is a gift of freedom. There is the gift of not belonging to anyone, no longer being under another’s power. And with this gift of freedom and autonomy, there is the possibility of real intimate connection, connection that’s not based on station and hierarchical structures of power but on respect and care of one another.

(1) Example?

2. The story invites us to consider one another as equals and peers, and where there are imbalances of power, to consider how our relational generosity can bring greater equality.

- a) The setup is that Peter, after hearing a story about how, within spiritual community, individuals are to relate to one another, particularly when there has been a wrong, asks this question about how many times he’s required to forgive his brother or sister. This is not biological, he meant his community member. Someone in his church.
- b) The response of Jesus’ expectation of unlimited *aphiemi* for his followers toward one another goes beyond just telling them to be nice to one another. **It also is a reminder that they cannot maintain power over one another.** To be in that place of regularly releasing one another’s debts means they must strive to maintain equality amongst themselves. If Jesus intended his community to be a hierarchical structure then he’d address this word of forgiveness only to those in power. But the context of it coming after he’s just shared how Jesus-followers are to care for one another means that this is not just for the leaders alone, it’s for all who call themselves followers of Jesus. **They are to regard one another as brothers and sisters, as peers, as equals.** It is one within that place of shared power that there is capacity and expectation for them to release one another as needed. It’s an act of service that he expects amongst them, just as he asks them to literally wash one another’s feet, or to give their friends the more prominent seat at the dinner table. Again and again Jesus is asking us **to take moves away from securing our own status and towards creating communities of shared power. Communities of equality.**

- c) **Sometimes our act of forgiveness brings greater equality.** In the case of the story, the slave is never gonna be equal to the King, but the forgiven debt gives him a level of freedom and a much closer position to the King than he had before. He is no longer beholden to him. In the same way, we're invited to imagine God's grace giving us a freedom to approach God not as dependents as much as loving relations. If we've been offended by a peer, perhaps our offense becomes something we're tempted to lord over them, to feel superior. The shame of the offense may also cause our offender to feel like they are less worthy than us, that they are indebted to us. In that case, letting go of the offense becomes away to restore equity between us. It takes us back to a level playing field where we can regard one another as community, as kin.
 - d) **But sometimes, surrendering of power, repentance needs to happen first so forgiveness can flow.** For this reason, Frederick Keene has a critique of the catholic church that moves priests who have been accused of sexual misconduct to a different dioceses, but allow them to remain as priests, and then to ask the survivors of the abuse to forgive the priests. For Keene, if the church is serious about the need for survivors of abuse to forgive those who have abused them, then they must also be serious about equality between the parties. Forgiveness can't happen between someone with less power and someone with more power. The only way the priest can be forgiven, Keene would say, is if he is first stripped of his ordination. If he is removed from his role as priest, restored to equal status with the rest of the community, he can now receive the forgiveness of the community.
- 3. The story invites us to extend release towards others, just as we are in need of, and have indeed experienced release.**
- a) Relational currency has come our way. What are we going to do with it?
 - (1) withhold it, stingily to ourselves or be generous?
 - b) Practically what might it mean to "release" one another? To exhibit generosity of spirit towards one another?
 - (1) **Release offense.** Someone says something that provoke you, perhaps hurts. We have a hard conversation that goes badly and we're tempted to just walk away. I think the story invites us not to just sweep it under the rug. The offense must be named, just as the king makes clear the debt he is owed. But after accounting, what would it mean to release the offense?
 - (2) **Share burdens.** Part of what's behind pledge campaign. Create unhelpful power dynamics when some are always serving and others are doing the bulk of receiving. Moving toward shared service brings greater equity. It also communicates care and generosity of spirit towards one another. It says I care about my mother and my sister. I don't want them to get burned out; I want to give some of my own time and energy and money because I have received and I care about others receiving too.

Time for conversation. Here are our Questions:

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How have you seen relational currency at play in your life? How have you dispersed it or withheld it? How have you received it or been denied it?
2. Are there relationships in your life where you have struggled to release others? How is this framework of relational generosity helpful or challenging?
3. Where have you seen power dynamics at play in your relationships? What would it mean for those relationships to move toward greater equity?