



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For some reason, three different people this week asked me what the topic of my sermon was going to be. And I had this really pissy response: forgiveness is overrated. And one person said to me, are you being sarcastic? And I said, no. And another person just looked at me in sheer terror and said, no, you're wrong. And it was so beautiful. And another person just smiled at me like a Cheshire cat, like he knew what I was going to say.

Forgiveness is overrated. I came to this conclusion after reading this passage from the gospel of Matthew where Peter asked Jesus a very helpful question. Just how many times am I supposed to forgive my brother? And he comes up with this really biblical number, you know, seven times. None of this fool me once and shame on you, and fool me once, shame on me stuff. This is like fool me over and over and over again and I'm going to forgive you over and over again. And this cycle continues for seven whole times until Jesus says well, no, that's not enough.

And it reminds me of a mother in church whose adult son would come home occasionally. And he promised that he was clean now, and then he would steal money to buy drugs. And it kept happening over and over. And so she went to her Bible study group and she said, how many times do I forgive him? And one of the participants who had read the King James translation of this passage where Jesus doesn't say, 77 times, but 70 times seven, he says to the mother 490 times, and then you can kick the kid out. And the mother looked panicked.

But Jesus seems to agree with the Bible study guy. He offers this insane, totally nonsensical parable. And this whole thing is a study in extreme hyperbole. This king is lending money to his slaves and he expects the slaves to pay him back. And the amount that he lends to one of the slaves is 10,000 talents. A talent is a value equivalent to about 20 years' wages. So when I asked the Google, how much is 10,000 talents worth today? The Google said, not \$3.48 million, but \$3.48 billion. Now we're in the theater of the absurd.

So this wealthy slave is now asked to pay it all back, and since he can't, the king who lent it to him in the first place decides to sell him, his wife, his kids, and all of his possessions in order to make up for his loss. And I want you to pay attention because Jesus is saying that the king is willing to sell people to make money.

This is not what God does. This is what humans do. And so the slave begs and pleads for his life and in continued hyperbole promises to pay back everything, every last billion.

And then comes our favorite part. The king has pity on this rich and wealthy slave and releases him and forgives him his whole entire debt. And the slave gets away scot free with billions of dollars, owing nothing to nobody. And I'm curious how you feel about this. What do you notice about your response to the king's forgiveness? Because how you experience this event may help you understand what you think about this cycle of forgiveness.

Are you surprised by this cancellation of the debt? Are you thinking that this generosity of the king is so impressive and you want to be like him? Or are you thinking about that poor, ragged to rich slave who got away and doesn't have to worry about the burden anymore and you're excited about the relief and the joy that he must feel? Or are you perhaps thinking this is ridiculous? This is just unfair. This is not what we should be doing. Or do you think the king's response is normative and this is exactly how we should all be acting?

It's a test of your understanding of forgiveness. And to further test you, Jesus tells the second half of this parable, in which both the slaves and the king's actions are similar. The slave meets another slave who owes him a hundred denarii, which is about 20 grand, and that slave is held accountable for his debt. And he throws him in jail, and the king finds out. The king becomes offended, and he reverses his decision of forgiveness. And now everybody's in prison, the slaves and the king, because they're all bound to a pattern of retribution.

And herein lies the problem with forgiveness. It keeps you captive to a cycle of holding offenses and forgiving and transgressing and being forgiven. And that is why I think forgiveness has way too much power. Because forgiveness is only necessary when we offend one another. It's necessary when we think we need to hold debts against each other, whether they be monetary or political or social or relational. If you continue to engage in forgiving and not forgiving, this cycle just continues with you. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to go through this cycle with God. And I certainly don't want to go through it with you.

So can there be another way? Could Jesus be hinting through this hyperbolic parable that there's actually a different way of living that doesn't follow the pattern of committing offenses and forgiving them or doing something wrong and being forgiven? In other words, is there a different way of being for you and me that breaks this cycle of offenses and forgiveness? In other words, can you change so that you no longer need to forgive?

Now, let me say something about change by telling you about this little incident that's been happening in the very small world of clergy people during this

month of September. So there was a blog post two weeks ago that caused a great stir. It was written by the now former pastor, Alex Lang, who was the senior minister of First Presbyterian Church in Arlington Hills, Illinois.

And he was the pastor there for 10 years. He had a very good congregation, a thousand members. And Lange, who is forty-three years old, preached his final sermon on the last Sunday in August, and then quit the ministry. And he wrote his final blog post about his experience, and he titled it, Why I Left the Church.

And his blog, which he's been doing for years, usually had about a couple hundred readers. But something about this post struck a chord. And pretty soon pastors, not just in his Presbyterian denomination, but Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Reformed, they were all sharing it among one another. And yesterday when I checked, There were over 350,000 hits. And I need to tell you in 2020, they counted how many clergy people there are. There's 440,000 of us.

So Lang is part of what is being termed the great pastor resignation. Since the pandemic, pastors have left or have thought of leaving in greater numbers than ever. And there's all kinds of reasons being offered. Clergy burnout. Fewer people going to church. Most congregations are struggling financially and can't support full time clergy and so on and so forth. But in his blog post, Alex Lang offered an interesting reason. He called it the growth mindset versus the fixed mindset.

And so people with growth mindsets, they're people who are willing to take chances. They want to learn new things. They enjoy learning new things, and they're not afraid to fail. And people with fixed mindsets, they don't like to be challenged. They don't like change, and they especially do not like changing themselves. And Lang had hoped that his church was filled with people with the growth mindset.

So he wrote, "When I became a pastor, I thought that the reason why this group of people gathered every Sunday was to explore deep questions about life and to push ourselves to become better humans. What I've learned over the last ten years is that my assumption was wrong. Most Christians don't want their thinking challenged. They come to church to reinforce what they've believed their entire lives. From their perspective, the job of the pastor is not to push them to grow, but to reassure them that they are already on the right track."

After I read this, my first response was, Lang had never met y'all. Because I am convinced that everyone who comes into this place, everyone who watches online, everyone who listens to the podcast or reads the transcripts, all of you feel called to be a better version of yourself. And you want this because of what

Father Bill said last week. You and I are here to make room for God in our lives, and what happens when you make room for God.

And I want to be clear, this is no joke. When you make room for God, God changes you. You see things differently, you act differently, you become a different person. You are different. God does not leave you unscathed when you come in front of the magnificent and glorious presence of God. So, how may God be changing you when it comes to forgiveness?

I was reading some Anne Lamott, who's this wonderful mystic, who in her more mature years is very open about her own brokenness of her life. She's an alcoholic. Her problems with her love life. She's divorced. Her problems with her relationship with her son. They're estranged. Her jealousy of other authors who are doing better than her. Her disappointment with God and with this bracing way of speaking of this really unkind truth in her life. She also has this way of saying Hallelujah Anyway. It's the title of her book.

And in this one chapter, she was trying to understand why she held grudges. Why did she keep track of the wrongs that were done to her? Why did she pay attention to the slights and always remember them? And she then remembered two things. She remembered hearing an Indian mystic who, when he was asked, what was his secret to always being so serene? He responded, I do not mind what happens. And she wondered, like you and me, how do you get to that place? How do you let go of your anger of not having your debts unpaid? How do you let go of that irritation of unfair treatment or your hurt for being stabbed in the back? How do you not mind what happens to you?

And then she remembered the second thing. She remembered that St. Paul said something earlier in the Book of Romans, and he would say, well, nothing can separate us from the love of God and Christ, Jesus. And what he meant was that no matter what we do or how we act, we cannot interrupt the immense ocean of kindness and mercy that is coming our way. It's a tidal wave. Actually, it's a tsunami and it's attacking you and you need to swim in that kindness and love and mercy.

And you can't do anything to prevent Jesus from coming up to you and whispering in your ear as He hangs on the cross, I will be with you always. And there is nothing you can do to stop the Holy Spirit from finding you down in the depths and pulling you up from there, no matter how you got there, whether it was your doing or not, and taking you and holding you like a hen covers her chicks, and sharing the love of God with you, because nothing is going to prevent God from acting out of mercy toward you.

And it's why Jesus ends this parable with this threat. So my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your

heart. It's a perfect ending for an extremely crazy and silly parable because it's an empty threat. God doesn't do that. It's nonsense. God doesn't have a database of all your wrongs. God doesn't have an account ledger keeping track of all the sins in the world. God has a cross and an empty tomb. And Jesus walks on that water of kindness and mercy to you and grabs you out of the tumultuous storm and says to you, peace.

I don't know about you, but I am tired of being a person who always has to be injured and to forgive. I want to be humble. I want to be slow, slow, so slow to anger. I want to be filled with this endless love that just won't stop. And that means, yeah, things are going to happen to me. But I don't mind. Lamont called this cooperating with kindness. She said we soften ever so slightly just one to two percent of humility, and I'll be damned if that ain't enough.

So let me leave you with this. People who make room for God have a growth mindset about how to be. How to be different when things go terribly wrong. You know, what struck me about the king and that slave was their response to being wrong was exactly the same. They both lashed out in anger. The slave seizes the other slave by the throat and throws him in jail. The king hands the other slave over to be tortured. With anger, there is no mercy. And when there is no mercy, there is no room for God.

When you and I need to forgive, it probably means we already became angry. What can we do to resist that anger? What can we do to live out that one to two percent of humility and allow that to grow in you, courtesy of the one who's going to make all things new, including your heart? I don't know about you, but I'm choosing to have a growth mindset. And I want to spend the rest of my life in a vast space of powerful healing where anger just doesn't make any sense. But there's a generosity and a peace that reigns in me because everything is well. Because cosmically, God is taking care of everything and it's beyond my understanding and it's utterly true.

And in that space, I can begin to envision what it means not to mind what happens to me because I trust God, I soften, I trust God to make a way out of no way and I don't need to fight anymore. God's going to make all the debts disappear. God's going to provide abundance for everyone, whether they pay for it or not. God's going to make everything holy and good and beautiful because God did so with Jesus's crucifixion. And I find that my anger, it goes away. And I can see things differently because God is changing me. And I experienced my messed up life with wonder and with a lot of humor. This is the God that I make room for. What happens to you when you make room for this God?

Amen.

