

“I Give Up. Hold Me.”
March 10, 2019 (First Lent)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Matthew 18:21-35

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?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, '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?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should 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."

When my daughter Ellie was only about two years old, we decided to go out and get some ice cream, a kind of “Mommy/Daughter” date. I don’t remember the occasion (but there never has to be a special occasion for ice cream, right?). So we walk out to the car, Ellie hops in her car seat; but just as I’m leaning in to try to buckle her in, Ellie suddenly, inexplicably, howls with rage, “NO! I DO IT MYSELF!” She grabs the buckles and tries to strap herself in. Of course, this does not work. Ellie couldn’t do it herself. She was two years old. She was not capable of buckling a seat belt. But still she insisted, and she insisted; she tried, and she tried. For my part, I was losing patience. I wanted ice cream.

So after a few minutes of letting Ellie struggle, I finally took the seat belt from her. Yes, I was impatient; but suddenly I also had a lot of compassion for my daughter. I mean, it’s hard to be a toddler! So I took the seat belt from her, and I said something like this: “Sweetie, you can’t do it yourself. Let me help you.” I buckled her in.

But it’s hard to be a toddler. Ellie cried all the way to the ice cream shop.

2000 years ago, Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, thinks he's on a roll. He thinks he's all that. He thinks he understands something about the Kingdom of God, and he wants to brag about it. So he struts right up to Jesus and asks real loud so that everyone can hear him: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as SEVEN times?!" Peter is so pleased with himself, so proud. "Hey, look at me, everyone! I could forgive someone *seven whole times* if I wanted to! That's a lot."

Jesus rolls his eyes, and when he answers, he blows Peter's mind, knocks him right off his high horse: "No, Peter, not seven times, but *seventy-seven* times. Now, THAT'S a lot."

Peter doesn't get it. Probably the other disciples don't get it either. So Jesus does what he is so fond of doing in situations like these, when the disciples start acting all smarty-pants and self-important and too-big-for-their-britches. Jesus tells them a story.

"Let me tell you a little something about the kingdom of heaven," Jesus begins. The disciples pull up their chairs. "Once upon a time, there was a king. Well, one day the king discovers that there's this guy, one of the slaves of the kingdom, who owes him ten thousand talents."

"Ooooh," the disciples murmur. That's a lot of talents. A LOT. An unthinkable amount, really, worth about 150,000 years of labor. The disciples move closer as Jesus continues.

"So this guy, this slave, is brought to the king, but obviously, he can't pay all that debt. So the king orders him to be sold, together with his wife and children, and that the payment be made. But the guy falls on his knees before the king and says, 'Have patience with me! Just give me a little more time, and I will repay everything!!'"

The disciples, gathered tightly around Jesus by now, slowly shake their heads, clicking their tongues. Poor guy. He doesn't have a prayer.

Jesus raises his eyebrows, and continues: "BUT... out of pity for him, the king **RELEASES** him and **FORGIVES** him his debt!"

The disciples gasp. How can this be? A king who releases his slave? How absurd! What is the world coming to, when a slave can get away with a thing like that? With the disciples' mouths hanging open, Jesus continues his tale.

"So anyway, that same slave, as he is leaving the king's palace, just happens across one of his fellow slaves who just happens to owe him a hundred denarii."

The disciples nod to themselves. A hundred denarii – that's nothing. Just about one day's worth of wages. Surely the slave will forgive such a meager debt.

Jesus goes on. "But the slave seizes his fellow by the throat, and growls, 'Pay what you owe!!'"

Jesus goes on. "Well, the poor guy falls on his knees before the slave and pleads with all his might, 'Have patience with me! And I will pay you!' But still the first slave refuses. And not only that, he throws him into prison. Locks him up tight."

The disciples' mouths are hanging open again. It was strange enough when the king forgave the *first* slave all that debt, but imagine that same slave not returning the favor... and, this time, when he is owed such a small amount!

Jesus chuckles a little to himself, then goes on: "When all the other slaves hear about this, they are pretty upset about it, and go tell their king what has happened. The king summons the first slave, and really lets him have it: 'You wicked slave!! How quickly you forget. I forgave you ALL that debt you owed ME, and look at you, not able to have even an ounce, even a smidge, even a teeny tiny drop of that same mercy I showed to you!' And in his anger, the king sends him to prison."

You can practically hear a pin drop as Jesus concludes his parable: "So it is with everyone, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Peter gulps. Maybe he'll think twice before showing off in front of the others again. The rest of the disciples slowly begin to dissipate. They need to mull this strange story over, think about it, pray. As usual, Jesus has turned their little worlds upside down.

So, what's the deal here? Why is the first slave unable to forgive his fellow slave such a meager debt, especially after he has been forgiven so extravagantly by their king?

Here's why, I think: *the first slave didn't really accept – didn't really believe – he had been forgiven by the king.* The slave in Jesus' story didn't get forgiveness. He didn't grasp grace. He refused the gift. *He wanted to do it himself.*

Here's something I noticed about the story. It may have seemed like a small detail at first, but I think it's actually pretty important, an interesting glimpse into the slave's psyche. Did you notice that, when the first slave pleads with the king, *he asks for more time?* "So the slave fell on his knees before [the king], saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" This poor slave is asking for an extension! He thinks that, with just a few more days, he can get the money together and pay what he owes. Y'all, this is crazy!! There is no way on God's green earth that this slave, or anyone, could pay off 150,000 years of labor! But this slave actually thinks he can do it. If he works hard enough, if he tries hard enough, if he strives hard enough, he will be able to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, and pay that incredible debt. With just a little more time, he will be able to do it himself.

Who is he kidding? Even the biggest bootstraps in the world couldn't pay off a debt like that. A thousand lifetimes of twelve-hour days could not begin to earn enough money. The slave's debt can never be paid. No matter how hard he works. No matter how hard he tries. But there he is, all the same, pathetically insisting that all he needs is a little more time. This slave is so deluded that he thinks – he actually believes – that he can solve the problem on his own.

It's easy for me to make fun of this slave, to shake my head and click my tongue and wonder why he's so crazy. But, when I start to get honest, I have to ask myself: am I really that different? How many times in my own life have I refused the grace of God? How many times have I said to God, "No, no thank you. I've got this. I'm strong enough, or smart enough, or resourceful enough, or good enough, or hard-working enough to do it myself. Thanks, but no thanks, God."

I can make fun of this slave for his delusion, but mine is just as real. Anytime I put faith in my own efforts, I am doing exactly what this first slave is doing. Anytime I think I can do it myself, I am acting as absurdly as he does.

And this kind of thinking is not only destructive to me, it's harmful for those around me. When I think I can do it myself, when I don't accept my weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and limitations, I don't accept yours very well either. When I think I can do it myself, I don't see that God's grace is enough – always enough – for me, and for you. And so I'm not only hard on myself, I'm hard on the people around me. And that's a terrible place to be. It's kind of like I am I prison. A prison of my own making.

Even after ice cream, Ellie was still pretty mad at me. After all, she wanted to buckle herself in, and I hadn't let her. So when we got back from the ice cream parlor, we went our separate ways. Ellie, still sniffling, slunked into her room. I sat down in my favorite chair and started reading. But after a few minutes had passed, here comes Ellie, creeping out of her room. She stands all silent, right in front of me. I'm pretty amused by this, and pretend to ignore her. A few more moments pass. Finally, Ellie can't stand it any longer. She puts her hands squarely on her hips, and practically roars, "PUT THAT BOOK DOWN AND HOLD ME."

Ellie was smarter than I am most of the time. Even at two years old, she knew she could only put up this "do it myself" façade for so long. After just a little time had passed, Ellie surrendered. She gave up. She gave in. And she accepted the love that was there for her, and had been all along: "Put that book down and hold me."

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the perfect time to reflect on how we relate to God, what to say to God, what to ask from God. And all God wants to hear from me, from you is "Hold me." During Lent, during life, that's what God wants to hear from us. God knows we can't do it ourselves. No matter how much we might kid ourselves about our own abilities, God doesn't buy it. God knows our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our limitations. God knows all this about us, and God loves us anyway.

God gives us mercy and help. Power and strength. Healing and forgiveness. God offers us the stuff we could never earn, never achieve, never acquire on our own, no matter how hard we try. God knows that we cannot do it ourselves, so God gives us what we most deeply need. God gives us grace: embracing us, drawing us near, holding us close. And, in return, God only wants to hear two things from us: "I give up" and "Hold me."

Thanks be to God.