

Sermon: Based on Matthew 18:21-35

Last week I talked about sin. I thought this week, I might talk a little about forgiveness. As the hymn last week put it, “We seek forgiveness from God and we seek forgiveness from each other.” And sometimes, to be quite honest, we withhold forgiveness from each other as well.

Sometimes we really like to hold on to things, don't we? I once heard someone say, “She went ahead and cut her hair without a word to anyone. I will never forgive her. NEVER!!!” I thought, “really? You are mad that she cut her hair? You are gonna hold a grudge about that for the rest of your life? You are going to let a haircut break your relationship?”

Now, I have no idea of the circumstances. No idea how old the person who cut their hair was but I gathered they were an adult. No idea what the old hairdo or the new hair cut was like. Maybe they looked funny at grad. Perhaps they “ruined” the wedding pictures – but that was not mentioned – only the fact that she cut her hair. I wondered if the person who cut their hair had regretted doing it. I wondered if they had actually apologized and been refused forgiveness. But basically, I just don't get it.

But I do know that hair grows. So however strange or bad the haircut in question was, it's not permanent. And, I know of no reason why one adult would think they had a say over another adult's decisions about their hair. If I decide to get a hairdo that makes me look daft, well, that's quite literally, on me. I'm the one that is going to look like a kook. I'm not sure haircuts is a thing to withhold forgiveness about.

Someone I know quite well had an affair. I was really upset when I found out. I knew the original couple quite well and I genuinely liked both people individually & as a couple. Then one of them cheated. To put it in Christian terms, to use Biblical language, one of them committed the sin of adultery – a boundary had been transgressed. Not the first time this ever happened in the world. Many of us in Canada are guilty of such things.

Yet, I was so angry. In fact, I'm still kind of angry about it. But really, it is not really my fight. I am not one of the ones who was betrayed. The spouse who was cheated upon, the children of what was ultimately a broken marriage; THEY could & likely were very angry.

But why am I angry? No one had broken any promises to me. Perhaps I got mad because my friend was revealed to be other than I thought he was. I note that while it happened

many years ago, he has not apologized to me. Given that he has not sinned against me, really no apology is owed. Yet I fume & sulk.

There was a new church that had finally got its new building. They had struggled to pay for it and while the building was finished and they could use it, it was pretty stark. They told me it was like worshipping in an aircraft hangar – bare walls, concrete floor, stacking chairs in prim rows. The acoustics were great and many musicians were attracted to the church for recitals. Choirs wanted to hold concerts there. The church members had really pushed themselves to the limit to raise the money and there was nothing much left for fancying the place up. They were a little ashamed that they had such a stark church. So, the women's group decided they would do what they could to get it "nice" for Christmas. The best they felt they could do in terms of fund raising was bake sales and craft sales – one of the malls in the community let community groups have a table in the open spaces of the mall a few weekends in November. That was their target. They would raise the money from the general public, not ask for anything more from the congregation.

And they did well enough to raise money to buy garlands and ribbons to decorate the church. Someone donated a tree and they had matching garland for the tree as well as some ornaments that fit the colour scheme. Congregation members donated a few other ornaments and everything looked pretty nice for the concerts of the holiday season.

A few years later, there was enough money so that congregation was able to finally get carpet. I'm not sure it did much for the acoustics but it did warm the place up and make it nicer to walk on. But the new carpet was a disaster! Because the committee that choose the new carpet bought a patterned carpet with the dominant colour burgundy. The women's group was so mad. After all, those Christmas decorations? All a nice bright cherry red. The Christmas decorations could never be used in that space once the new carpet was in. what a waste of money and effort. And remember the effort had been considerable. The women told me they very nearly left the church over it. They felt that their work had been completely discounted, their contributions completely dismissed. Even after the building committee apologized, the women were still feeling huffy.

Gary Chapman, the author of the 5 Language of Love, has also written another book, with Jennifer Thomas, "the 5 Languages of Apology." In it, they describe different aspects of apology. They say, sometimes when we have been apologized to, and we are still feeling huffy, it is because we were looking for something that we did not hear. The 5 languages of apology are: expressing regret, accepting responsibility, making restitution, genuinely repenting, requesting forgiveness.

I suspect that the building committee said "sorry" – an expression of regret. But that decorating committee felt a need for a little more. Perhaps they needed some restitution –

money to buy more decorations that did not clash with the new carpet or at least evidence of genuine repentance. They might have wanted assurance that it would not happen again, that there would be more consultation on future matters.

The 5 Languages of Apology are sometimes helpful when trying to figure out how to apologize in a way that helps the other person hear & accept our apology as genuine. It has also helped me understand when I have not been able to accept an apology. Someone once apologized to me standing on my door step sniffing, beating his breast & whispering "sorry." I wanted to hear it would never happen again.

If you think back to Adam and Eve in the garden confronted by God after the fall, God says "what have you done? Did you eat from the tree I told you not to eat from?" Adam does not even say "sorry." He blames Eve and she blames the serpent. Neither of them is accepting responsibility for their actions. With Bun-bun in the children's story, at first, I was not hearing genuine repentance. It sounded like Bun-bun was sorry they got in trouble not sorry they did the thing.

I want to note that forgiving does not mean forgetting. I have forgiven Bun-bun, but I will remember that when they thing they might get in trouble they might be speaking less than the whole truth. And that they sometimes take things that don't belong to them. Honestly, Simba does that as well. He is teaching me to be neat and tidy about things that I think are important. Simba takes little things off my desk to play with – he loves to use a usb key as a hockey puck, for example. He has not apologized for this either! But seriously, some people have habits of character and temperament that mean it is not safe for you to forget their behavior. You might forgive and perhaps be reconciled if they apologize but you will be wise to be careful in future.

Our gospel reading includes a parable about debt and debt holders. Like many parables, it is ridiculously over the top to help make the point. The first slave owed the king a debt described as 10,000 Talents. The second slave owed him 100 Denarii. The first slave asked for forgiveness and received it. The second slave also asked for forgiveness but did not get it.

We might miss some of drama in the story unless we realize what 100 Denarii and 10,000 Talents represents. 10,000 talents is not \$10,000. 100 Denarii is not \$100 bucks.

Bible commentaries tell me that one Denarii is the equivalent of one days wage for a day labourer. So, we might imagine that 100 Denarii would be about 4 months or 1/3 of a year's wages perhaps at minimum wage. Such a labourer, if they worked full time for 10 years, would earn perhaps 6,000 denarii which is equivalent to 1 Talent. 1 Talent, saved up, is enough money that a man would be considered rich. 10,000 Talents is then, 60 Million

Denarii – 60,000 million working days or about 200,000 years of labour. I have seen this as estimated in today's wages as equivalent to between \$3.5-7 Billion dollars.

So, in the parable, the first slave was forgiven a debt of \$3 Billion dollars at a minimum. Good thing he was forgiven! I can see no way that a slave could ever hope to repay such a debt. And the debt he in turn refused to forgive? I make that about \$10, 000.

The lead up to the telling of the parable is a conversation between Peter and Jesus. Peter wants to know if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? He suggests 7 times. Which is interesting. I believe the Jewish law codes says you must forgive 3 times. So, Peter is willing to go more than double beyond what is required. He understands that Christians are supposed to be more forgiving. And its interesting to me that the question is about another member of the church. The context is the faith community – not the guy who cut you off in traffic. Not the woman who ran the shopping cart into your leg. Not the kid who threw their report card in your garden on the way home from school. Peter understands that Christians are committed to being in relationship with one another in the community of faith and as such are supposed to be at least twice as forgiving as the general public.

But Jesus says, “no, not 7 times. 77 times.” WAAAAY more forgiving. And then Jesus tells the parable that is a little bit like a wacky cartoon. One man owes an enormous debt to the king and when its time to pay the debt and his family is threatened, he begs the king to be patient with him, give him more time. In reality, there is not enough time in the world for how would he get that kind of money? The king generously forgives the debt. And then the man confronts someone who owes him a relatively minor debt and is completely unforgiving and hard hearted. When the king finds out, that the man who received mercy had no mercy on others, the king is furious. And the man is judged by his own standards – no mercy.

While the parable is, as I say, a little bit cartoon like, it is also warning to us. How we judge others, may well be how we are ourselves judged. Are we hard hearted, insisting on our rights, refusing forgiveness even if that means breaking relationships? Whether it is an ill judged haircut, a church carpet that clashes with the Christmas decorations, a borrowed cell phone dropped into water or marital infidelity, when we are deciding whether we can forgive, we do well to consider our own situation.

The parable ought to remind us that we are like the first man in the parable. We have been forgiven an enormous debt not by the king but by God. The gift of salvation, forgiveness of sin is enormous, not something we could ever hope to earn on our own and not a debt we

can ever repay. It is only because of God's mercy and love that we have been forgiven our sin and reconciled with God.

And we then have a choice: do we forgive as we have been forgiven? As we have received mercy, do we have mercy on others? Or we act like the man in the parable & withhold mercy, demanding we are given what we are owed?

It is because we have been reconciled with God that we have the hope of reconciliation with one another. Sometimes there is a cost to that reconciliation: the forgiveness of financial debt as in the parable, a cell phone that needs to be repaired in the children's story, possibly a bad haircut in a wedding photo – I could go on.... But the question for us is why would we not give as we have received? If God has indeed been full of mercy & steadfast love, forgiving us our sin, if we are at all aware of this great gift, how could we not be forgiving & seeking to be reconciled with others? My prayer for us all this week is that we would seek to be as forgiving of others as we have been forgiven by God.

Children's Story script - Forgiveness

B: (*casually*) Hey, Lady, whatcha doing?
L: Oh, hi, Bun-bun. I'm just trying to figure out what's wrong with my phone.
B: (*a little nervously*) Oh! Is something wrong with it?
L: yeah, it's not working properly. It's almost like it got wet or something.
B: (*a lot nervously*) Is being wet bad for phones?
L: yes, moisture is terrible for electronics
B: ooooo... so, if water got on the phone, that would be not good?
L: Yes. I'm always very careful not to get water anywhere near my phone. Do you know something about my phone being near water?
B: maybe...
L: (*sternly*) Bun-bun, did water get on my phone?
B: not ON your phone... your phone might have, sort of, accidentally gotten IN some water...
L: Bun-bun, did you take my phone again?
B: (*nods*)
L: Bun-bun, you know you are not supposed to take my phone without permission...
B: I didn't TAKE it! I BORROWED it!
L: And how did my phone get in water?
B: (*big sigh, whispers*) I dropped it
L: You DROPPED it? In the cat's water dish? In the dishwater in the kitchen sink? What?
B: in the toilet...

- L: WHAT WERE YOU DOING WITH MY PHONE IN THE BATHROOM?!
- B: playing....
- L: Bun-bun, this is not a toy! It's a tool I use for work! You are not supposed to take my things without asking. And now that it's wet, it might not work ever again!
- B: (pouting) I know. (*with rising excitement*) Simba told me I shouldn't play with your phone. But he is not the boss me! He is only a big old cat! I can do whatever I want!
- L: Bun-bun! You KNOW BETTER THAN THAT!
- B: (*pause, whispering*) are you mad?
- L: You bet I'm mad! You take my stuff and your are careless and you wreck it! Of course I'm mad...
- B: (*whispers*) I'm sorry. (*Then louder*) Sorry. (*still louder*) SORRY! I'm SORRY! SORRY! SORRY! SORRY!
- L: (*sharply*) Bun-bun! Stop this! Stop jumping and shouting in my face.
- B: (*still shouting*) accept my 'pology! Say ok! I said sorry! You have to say OK! You must forgive! I said sorry!
- L: Bun-bun, I'm not sure I DO accept your apology. I'm not sure whether you are sorry you got caught or if you are really sorry you took my phone.
- B: you must forgive! I said sorry!
- L: Bun-bun, that is not how forgiveness works.
- B: (*whispers*) Do you hate me?
- L: No, Bun-bun. I'm very disappointed. And I'm really upset that my phone might be wrecked but I don't hate you. I love you Bun-bun.
- B: (*whispers*) are you going to send me away? Do I have to go to the bad bunny place?
- L: Bun-bun, I don't understand. What is the bad bunny place?
- B: It's the place where bad bunnies go. Simba said 'cuz I take your stuff and play with it, I have to go to the bad bunny place. You know.... JAIL.... (*a little pouty and a little afraid*) I don't want to go to jail. I want to stay with you.
- L: Oh, Bun-bun. You don't have to go to jail. Not today. But when you get older, if you haven't learned stop taking other people's things, that's called stealing you know, and grownups who steal things sometimes go to jail. You really must stop taking things that don't belong to you.
- B: but you still love me?
- L: Of course I do. You're my little bunny.
- B: (*pause*) Lady, does God hate me?
- L: why would God hate you?
- B: Because I'm a bad little bunny.
- L: Oh, Bun-bun, God loves you. I don' think you are a bad bunny in your heart. You sometimes get a little excited and you don't think before you do things. But I know God loves you. God wants you to grow up & make better choices but God loves you.
- B: Lady, I'm as sorry as I can be in my heart.
- L: Its ok Bun-bun, I forgive you. You want to snuggle?

- B: yeah... hey Lady, are we good now?
- L: yes Bun-bun, we are good.
- B: (*hopefully*) can we celebrate? (*with growing excitement*) Maybe we could order a pizza?!
- L: Bun-bun, we can't order a pizza. My phone is not working because it got wet when you dropped it in the toilet.
- B: (*wails*) BUT I SAID I WAS SORRY! (*sobbing*) And you forgave me! You said we were good!
- L: Bun-bun, I DO forgive you. We ARE good.
But my phone is still wrecked. Sometimes, we make choices that have consequences. We can say sorry and be forgiven but that doesn't magically make the phone all better. It's going to take a while to see if the phone can be fixed. I even might have to buy a new one. That's going to be expensive.
- B: (*whispers, sniffing*) I really am sorry...
- L: I know my honey bunny (*cuddles*). You know what? We can still celebrate. How about we have a salad?
- B: (*brightening up a little*) Salad? With lettuce?
- L: Sure! How about some radishes and maybe a little cucumber and some green pepper?
- B: OOOO! Can we have carrots for dessert?!
- L: Wow! You really want to celebrate!
- B: well, you forgave me!
- L: That is true! Hey, Bun-bun, you wanna pray?
- B: OK!
- L: Everyone at home can join in our prayer too.
- L: Dear God (*Bun-bun repeats it*). Thank you that you always hear my prayers. Thank you for always loving me. Please forgive me when I do wrong things and help me to be better and better so that I can be like Jesus. Please help me to get along with other people. Amen.