

**First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
September 11, 2011  
Rev. Diana Hartman  
Worship Theme: Quit Keeping Score  
Matthew 18: 21-35**

I admit that I found preaching from this thorny text of the parable of the wicked servant on the Anniversary of 9/11 a daunting and difficult task. It's been ten years since those hijacked planes, directed by terrorist, took so many innocent lives and yet the sorrow and grief are still with us. Every time I turn on the TV and hear mention of that horrific event my stomach feels sick and sadness wells up inside of me. My heart breaks with the magnitude of the loss then and the ongoing loss every day since. I continue to wonder if our Nation is ready to forgive.

The parable of the wicked servant is not a warm fuzzy passage; it is full of violence of its own. It comes at the end of the section of Mathews Gospel that speaks of what it means to be a part of the Christian community—a community of forgiven people. Again and again, Jesus stresses the importance of good relationships that bind the family of God together and that being part of the family of God is the most important thing in the world. Members of God's family are to do everything they possibly can to nourish and strengthen their bonds of love. And if you are wondering who belongs to God's family, we need look no further than the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus' command to love your neighbor.

Jesus explains that nothing is to get in the way of our love for one another, not insults or quarrels, not rivalries and put downs, not even blatant sins. As the disciples listen to Jesus go on and on about community, relationships and forgiveness, my favorite disciple, Peter speaks up. Peter wants to know exactly what is required of him. He is looking for the boundaries and limits to this relationship business. Jesus has just finished explaining the steps to regaining a relationship. First, go to that person and attempt to straighten out the problem. If that doesn't work, take a couple elders with you and try again. If that doesn't resolve the issue, ask the entire church to go with you. If this still doesn't work, continue to try to regain your brother or sister by treating them as someone you are trying to reach out too and build a relationship with for the first time.

Now, this process in itself seems nearly insurmountable, but then to add to the plan book, we are also to do this 70 times 7 times, in other words a limitless number of times. There is no need for a score card here. We might as well quit keeping score.

If we really think about this, it will wear us out. Forgiving someone once can be strenuous, forgiving 7 times seems above and beyond our limits, but to forgive 490 times or as is intended by this multiplication, limitless times, that is more than most of us are willing to shoot for.

Consider a simple example of someone missing an important meeting or dinner engagement that you have planned around his schedule. The first time he misses the date, you will understand, we all lead busy lives. But when it happens a second time, will you be willing to put yourself out in order to try for a third, fourth, fifth? Is seven enough? After all, once we have forgiven him seven times and been taken advantage of each time. Isn't that enough? Can't we stop now? Is seven times enough Peter asks Jesus?

Jesus responds to Peter, "Not seven times, but 70 times 7 (or seventy seven the Greek is not clear). While the exact number is not apparent, the point of the number is. Quit counting, quit keeping score, forgiveness is part

of the very personality of God and therefore of those made in God's image. We are supposed to forgive every time.

As Jesus has done on many occasions, he answers Peter with a story, a parable. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven may be compared to, but not equated with, a king who wished to settle accounts. The parable is a hyperbole, a gross exaggeration. The story begins simply enough with a king who is settling accounts with his servants. A servant who is heavily in debt is brought before him. We're told he owes 10 thousand talents or about 1.5 billion dollars in today's economy. Obviously, this is a gross exaggeration, for even if the servant who asks for more time were to work with all his family for the rest of his life, he could never repay such a debt. The king's first inclination is to sell the servant and his family and apply the proceeds to the debt. In desperation, the servant falls on his knees before the king and pleads for more time. When the king hears his pleas for mercy, in an act of unheard of and extreme generosity, the king forgives, in total, the servant's debt. The king quits keeping score.

Within moments, the forgiven servant comes upon a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii or about 3,000 dollars. Now is his opportunity to show forgiveness, but instead he grabs the man by the throat, demanding he pay the debt. When the man pleads with him as the servant had pleaded with the king, instead of showing the mercy he was shown, the forgiven servant has the man thrown into prison. When the king gets wind of what has happened, he has the first servant brought before him, revokes the mercy he had given and has him thrown into prison. "You wicked servant," the king says, "I forgave the debt you owed me, should you not have done the same to your fellow servant?"

I told you this was a thorny story. On the surface, the story reads that we should do unto others, as we would have them do unto us. Or another way to look at it could be to do unto others, as we would have God do unto us. Because if you don't quit keeping score on your brother, your heavenly Father will have you hauled off to his eternal penalty box and throw away the key.

This way of looking at this parable does not sound at all like the Jesus I have come to know and love. Read this way, we have to earn forgiveness by giving forgiveness to others; otherwise, we suffer eternally in hell. So I think we need to look at this story in another way. The story starts out so well, so where does it go so wrong? What made that servant so wicked? Why could he not forgive the debt that was owed him?

It seems to me that what went wrong was the wicked servant did not understand or accept the forgiveness granted to him. Perhaps, he was one of those players who equate forgiveness with having got away with something, having pulled the wool over the score keeper's eyes, having got one over on that soft hearted king.

When I think about my own understanding of forgiveness, I realize that I learned to forgive, because I have been the recipient of forgiveness. Its starts with the little things we do as children. I hit my sister. I say and mean, "I'm sorry." She forgives me because she wants our relationship to stay strong. As a teenager, I stay out too late, and cause my parents to worry. I say, "I'm sorry" and work to regain their trust. They forgive me so that we remain in a loving relationship. As an adult, I'm forgiven for my faults and debts by all sorts of friends and relatives, because the most important thing is our loving relationship. Forgiveness is an incredible experience. I feel like someone has taken that score card, torn it up, and thrown it away, refusing to keep score anymore. When I have asked for and been granted forgiveness, it has come as a free gift from someone I have

hurt, someone I have owed and that someone has decided that what is more important than getting even is staying in relationship with me.

Real forgiveness is about pure, unadulterated grace. When you know that you have received the real thing, you also begin to recognize bogus acts of forgiveness. Most of us have carried this out from time to time. Acting as if we have forgiven someone on the outside but continuing to harbor resentment on the inside. Sometimes we try to overlook or make excuses for the faults of others; we hide our feelings trying to avoid a fight. But often our actions betray our true feelings. When forgiveness is faked, we begin to have less and less to do with the other person until eventually we no longer have a relationship at all.

I think that this is what happened with the wicked servant. He has forgotten what it is like to be forgiven, genuinely forgiven from the heart. For if he could remember, how could he deprive anyone else the same experience? The servant has missed the significance of what has happened to him. It never occurred to him that he was left off the hook and is not being patronized by a sentimental old monarch. It never occurred to him that he was being forgiven by someone who knew the enormity of his debt but who was willing to let go, to stop keeping score, so that they could begin to rebuild their relationship.

That is what real forgiveness is all about. The only reason for any of us ever to forgive each other is because we want the relationship back again which is hard to do when you are keeping score. As long as you are focused on the debt that is owed, you tend to spend your time figuring out how to get paid back, proved right, or protected from harm.

Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurts. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it or tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is not an excuse for unjust behavior, and to forgive is not to forget. To forgive is not to allow the unjust behavior to continue.

Presbyterian minister, writer and retreat leader Marjorie Thompson writes:

“To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem...Forgiveness involves excusing the person from the punitive consequences they deserve because of the behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound to hold us trapped is broken.”

You know how the story ends. The wicked servant gets thrown in jail for the rest of his life but his imprisonment is a mere technicality. The wicked servant was already behind bars of his own making. By refusing to be forgiven and by refusing to forgive he had already created his own little solitary confinement where he could tally up the score all over his jail cell walls. There is no new future for him. Forgiveness has not changed him. He has not understood what has happened and hasn't received the forgiveness that was given.

So what message do we take from this parable? Is it, do unto to others or the king will do unto you? I don't think so. The message is, do unto others as the king as already done unto you. It's not a matter of earning your forgiveness or forgiving others so that you can get into the kingdom of God.

It is a matter of understanding that you have already been forgiven by that someone to whom you owe everything—your life and breath and all of creation, who has given to you again and again and again, and in return received precious little. You have been forgiven by that One who has looked over your score card, examined your enormous shortcomings, and debts, knowing that you can never repay. Someone who knows all of that about you has taken your score card, your IOUs and torn them into little pieces for one reason only, because that someone wants to remain in relationship to you, and wants you to be free to respond.

When someone like that has quit keeping score on you, you feel kind of foolish keeping score on other people. When you consider how many times you have been forgiven through no merit of your own, you feel a little petty keeping a running score up to seven or even seventy times seven. When you consider you are forgiven because someone loves you very, very, very much and wants to love you even more, it seems time to throw away the score cards and pencils. It is time to celebrate the joy of new beginnings. It is time to realize that we are God's family and God's love and forgiveness are freely given in unlimited quantity. Once you let that sink in, once you have really taken that into your own heart, how can you—how can any of us—pass up a single chance to do the same? Are we ready to forgive, heal, and hope for loving relationships with all of our brothers and sisters in the family of God even when the debt owed is enormous and forgiveness so complicated? With God's help, may it be so. Amen.