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9/17/17--University Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 18:21-35

## A NEW BUSINESS MODEL

What would you say is the hardest part about being a Christian? If someone were to ask you what was the hardest part about being a Christian, what would you say? I would have to wager that for most of us, the hardest thing about being a Christian is this business about forgiveness. Forgiveness lies at the very core of Christianity, but it is probably the hardest aspect of Christianity.

The thing is, we just can't seem to escape this issue about forgiveness. The mandate to forgive one another is everywhere we turn in Christianity. Recite the Lord's Prayer, there it is: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Celebrate the Lord's Supper, there it is: Jesus taking the cup and saying, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus dying on the cross, there it is: when Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." The Resurrection, there it is: Jesus forgiving not only his friends who betrayed and denied him, who left him to be tortured and killed, but also forgiving all of us our sins. At the core of Jesus' teachings lies this issue of forgiveness. Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story about the lousy son who squandered his father's money only to come home again and be received not with a much deserved lecture but instead with a great big welcome home party?

This issue of forgiveness lies at the core of what it means to be a Christian--God forgiving us for our sins and the mandate for us to do likewise. But it is perhaps the hardest, most painful aspect of being a Christian. And that is because people hurt one another in really awful ways. People can be despicable to one another. And the pain and injury people can inflict

on one another can be deep and lasting. So, clearly forgiving one who inflicts such painful wounds is not a trivial or simple matter.

So, now consider the lesson Jesus gives us today, a lesson on limitless forgiveness. Limitless forgiveness. This defies the conventional assumptions and models that govern our social interactions. Limitless forgiveness?

Peter comes to Jesus with a question. How often should I forgive someone? Peter puts forth what many of us would consider an extraordinarily generous offer--should I forgive someone 7 times? Think about that--seven times. Could you forgive someone seven times? That is a very generous offer. And in the social economy of our lives, seven seems not only generous but is rooted in an assumption of what is reasonable. In the business models that shape our human interactions, it is reasonable that there should be limits to forgiveness.

But then Jesus comes back with an entirely different business plan. He tells Peter, don't just forgive seven times, but forgive *seventy seven* times. Here we are treated to Jesus' use of hyperbole to make a point. Jesus uses exaggeration here. His intent is not that we should then count out seventy seven times and then we can consider ourselves done. His use of hyperbole is to drive home the point that forgiveness is not something you can tally or count or calculate until you have arrived at some final number. Forgiveness is limitless.

Then Jesus offers us a story about forgiveness. We hear about a servant who owed his king an enormous debt. In telling this story, Jesus makes the debt so big that his audience would have realized how absurd such a debt would really be. It was massive and no king would ever have given out so much money to a servant. But again, Jesus uses exaggeration to make his point. The point is, the servant owed his king a massive debt. Of course, the servant can't pay and the king intends to take punitive action. But the servant begs the king for more time. And

here the king does something extraordinary. The king steps out of the business-as-usual model for conducting human affairs and the king does something better than just giving the servant more time to repay--the king actually forgives the debt. This huge debt is now gone. Forgiven. In an extraordinary gesture, the king offers financial amnesty to this servant.

But this revolutionary act makes it no farther than the castle door. Because just fresh from being forgiven, the servant encounters a fellow servant who owes him a small amount of money. This freshly forgiven servant resumes the business as usual model that governs human interactions. He demands payment from the other servant, and when the servant cannot pay, he has the servant thrown in jail. He acts out of a former model of human interactions instead of out of the new model of grace he himself has just received.

The business model we live by in our daily lives is based on an economic understanding of scarcity and power. We operate from a mindset that there is limited money, limited resources, limited time. We have limited patience of others. We act in ways to secure our own welfare and power and prestige. And we're not just talking about politicians here. This applies to all of us.

But you've got to wonder how well our business as usual model for living has done for us humans. How well has this worked for us in our individual lives? How well has this worked down through human history? When injured by someone, we write them off, seek revenge, harbor grudges. So, communities and nations remain alienated for generations. Relationships in families are fractured. The wealthy get wealthier, the poor get poorer. Resentment builds. People turn to violence.

But Jesus puts forth a new way of conducting the business of our lives that is predicated upon grace. The entire Christian message is the message of grace. Jesus' life attests to God's grace. Even after great injury and harm was imposed upon Jesus, God responds with love and

forgiveness to reshape us and remold us into new creations. The Christian story is about God doing something astonishingly new for us, freeing us from the old business-as-usual models that governed our lives and held us captive. And in our baptisms, we accept the calling to live out this forgiving love ourselves. When we are baptized, we discard an old way of doing business in the world and emerge from the waters as new creations, new people who will live out a new way of doing business in this world. The old way is gone. A new way is our calling. And this new way of doing business means we are people who forgive. We aren't given a choice. It comes with the new life in Christ.

But what a hard calling it is. I truly don't want to minimize the depth of how hard this mandate to forgive can be. I think that often, forgiveness is a journey. In some cases, we may not totally arrive at the destination. It may be a process we struggle with throughout our lives. Sometimes we may have arrived at forgiving someone, only to have that wound re-opened by some circumstance in life and then we are faced with starting that process all over again. I'm sure we can all imagine cases where we may conclude that forgiveness would be impossible, simply impossible for us to carry out. The mandate to forgive should certainly never be used as a spiritual weapon to guilt people who are deeply wounded and in pain. Here's the thing we confront however: how has resentment, anger, bitterness, division, alienation, hostility ever improved an individual or a society? And yet, forgiveness carries the potential of transformation. Those occasions when we witness genuine forgiveness are shocking and memorable: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa where people who committed horrific atrocities in the apartheid era were granted amnesty if they accounted for their crimes; or the occasion when the Amish families forgave the man who had murdered their school children and rallied around his widow; or the stories we sometimes hear about victims

and the victimizers reconciling. A story I was touched by was about a woman who formed a lasting friendship with the man in prison who murdered her son. These occasions are memorable because of how they reflect a new way of doing business in the world. And these occasions carry the potential to be transformative.

As we each wrestle with our own calling to be forgiving people, it may be helpful for us to recall what enables us to undertake this seemingly impossible task. Our ability to forgive arises from the fact that God has first forgiven us. We are repeatedly forgiven by God. That's what Jesus leads with in his story about the unforgiving servant. First the king forgives him. He has been shown mercy. And we are shown mercy--for the big things we have done in our lives and for the small things we have done or failed to do, for the dark thoughts we are glad no one else can see. Mercy first comes to us. And from this gift comes the call to do likewise.

Writer Scott Hoezee offers a fresh way of thinking about forgiveness. He writes that "Forgiveness is not a tool you need just once in a while. Forgiveness is not like that Phillips screwdriver that you keep out in the garage and that you fetch now and then when a kitchen cabinet is loose . . . Forgiveness not a specialty tool to be utilized occasionally. Forgiveness is more like the clothes on your back. You don't generally walk around the house naked and you surely never leave the house without some kind of attire covering you. Forgiveness is more like that: it goes with you, accompanies you, and is needed by you everywhere you go."

I wonder if this perspective may prove useful to us. Instead of thinking about forgiveness as a tool we take out now and again whenever we have a problem that needs fixing, if we think of it instead as the clothing we wear in life. Grace becomes the clothing we dress ourselves in, what we wrap ourselves in each and every day as we encounter the people at the grocery store, the drivers on the road, the colleague at work, our in-laws and family members, the members of

an opposing political party. Like a new robe draped over us when we have come up from the waters of baptism, we are given new attire to wear for conducting the business of our God.

Scott Hoezee observes that, "The reason God expects us to forgive as a result of being forgiven is the same reason you can expect to get wet after diving into a lake: water is wet and when you immerse yourself in it, *you* get wet. So also with forgiving grace . . . When God immerses you in grace and saves your life eternally by it, you will be dripping with grace yourself. You will be full of grace and truth and so spread it to others. God forgives us daily. We forgive others daily. Forgiveness is our lifestyle."

Forgiveness is your lifestyle. It is no longer business as usual