

There once was a millionaire who owned a lot in an exclusive residential area of New York City. This particular lot presented a very unusual problem. The lot was five feet wide and about a hundred feet long. The lot next door was planned for an apartment house and the developers purchased the necessary plots for the project all except the five feet wide lot owned by the millionaire. The developers offered the millionaire \$1000 for the lot, but he countered with \$5000, and the developers balked. Instead, the developers proceeded to build their apartment. The millionaire was so angered by their refusal and rebuttal that he decided to get even.

He hired an architect and a contractor, and had a house designed for that weird, shaped lot. It was five feet wide and ran the entire length of the property. He moved in and set up house in this narrow house. Each room was barely wide enough for a single piece of furniture. His hatred for the people on either side of this small lot made him decide to ruin the look of the entire area, and it blocked the light to the apartment building.

The neighbors complained that it was a blight to the neighborhood. But the city fathers couldn't find any code forbidding it. This millionaire moved into it, and lived there the rest of his life. The only one who was really punished was him. He moved into a long narrow little house that held only hate and discomfort. The house became known throughout the neighborhood as "Spite House."

When I first read that story, I thought, surely this is an exaggeration. So, I did some research trying to find out whether this was a true story or just one of those myths that has been passed on. Not only did I find out that it was true. I found out the man's name, Joseph Richardson. But what was even more shocking is the fact that I found no less than a dozen other "Spite Houses" in a simple online search.

There's one in Carlsbad, New Mexico, built to block the Mayor's view and annoy him. There are two in San Francisco; One at Deadman's Point, Maine; one in Huntsville, Alabama; one in Boston, one that is supposed to be haunted and has been turned into a Bed & Breakfast in Fredrick, Maryland; and a triangle shaped "Spite House" in Montlake, Washington, a suburb of Seattle.

Our passage today from the Gospel of Matthew is the parable of the ungrateful servant. It's a story about our debt of sin. It's about God's free and redeeming grace. It's also about anger and spite, and the judgment that follows an unforgiving spirit. Let's look at the passage.¹

Peter asked Jesus "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" Note, he could have stopped right there but he ended the question with "Up to seven times?" Peter thought he was being generous, since the religious leaders of the day taught that a person only needed to forgive an offense three times.

"If a man transgresses one time, forgive him. If a man transgresses two times, forgive him. If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. If a man transgresses four times, do not forgive him." What Peter has done is to take this law of limited forgiveness, multiply it by two and add one, and then sit back with a smile on his face and say: Now how is that for being a great guy? And he surely must have been taken aback when Jesus said you must forgive seventy times seven. Jesus' shocking reply was not intended to give Peter a specific number of times to forgive. It was a proverbial number suggesting an unlimited number of times. Jesus could easily have said seventy times or seven billion times. No matter the number it didn't matter, the result is the same. We are to forgive over and over and over.

¹ Billy D. Strayhorn, Luxuriate In God's Grace

God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God's forgiveness has its limits.

Then Jesus proceeded to tell a story. There was a certain king who had a day of reckoning for his servants...

In order for there to be forgiveness, there must first be sin or debt. The servant who is brought before the king owes an outrageous sum that he has no chance of repaying. The king's first reaction, to sell this servant and his family, puts utter fear into the heart of the servant, such that he begs for mercy.

The king's threat, like God's law, is a mirror that brings the servant/sinner to self-knowledge and repentance. Only when debtors acknowledge the overwhelming weight of their debt can they see the true greatness of God's mercy.

The king is quick to forgive the impoverished servant completely (rather than merely offering him extra time to pay the debt) which demonstrates God's gracious stance toward the humble. The penitent servant walks away from Act 1 free from debt and presumably, mindful of God's grace. However, within moments, this mindfulness dissolves in the face of a fellow servant who owes him a relatively tiny sum. Like a person who walks away from a mirror and forgets what his face looks like, the first servant forgets the mercy he has just received and neglects to pass it along.

Act 2 brings about the unfortunate events in which he is reported by indignant witnesses and subsequently meets the wrathful side of the once-merciful king. God, it seems, does not take kindly to notions of "cheap grace"; moreover, God is responsive when fellow servants cry foul. Those who truly understand the magnitude of God's mercy must pay it forward to their debtors. The servant's unwillingness to forgive reveals his lack of gratitude, which brings him crashing back into his own debt. Moreover, his punishment after having been forgiven is even greater than the original punishment would have been, before he had ever received the gospel.

In Biblical times, serious consequences awaited those who could not pay their debts. A person lending money could seize the borrower who couldn't pay and force him or his family to work until the debt was paid. The debtor could also be thrown into prison, or his family could be sold into slavery to help pay off the debt. It was hoped that the debtor, while in prison, would sell off his landholdings or that relatives would pay the debt. If not, the debtor could remain in prison for life.

Jesus speaks to the necessity of forgiveness because he knows the effects unforgiveness has on individuals and communities. There are so many situations within our society, in the world, in our churches, in our families, and in our workplaces that, when not dealt with, can sow the seed of bitterness and fester into deep, painful wounds.

Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person's actions or attitudes in our lives.

Today, who is God calling you to ask forgiveness from? Let us take a moment of silence to hear God's calling upon your heart this morning. <silence>

Let us pray,

Dearest Father, please forgive us when we allow anger and bitterness to fill our hearts because we refuse to forgive someone who has hurt us. Teach us how to lay down our rights and choose to forgive in the same way You have forgiven us. Amen and Amen.