

“Godspell: The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant”
Matthew 18:21-35

Today’s parable is about forgiveness. What came to my mind as I read the parable was a recent article by Professor David Bentley Hart in the New York Times by this title (screen), “Why Do People Believe in Hell?” Hart has recently released a scholarly book challenging the validity of the concept of hell in which he argues that the doctrine of eternal damnation does not have any biblical or historical validity. Here is an old cartoon from Tom and Jerry that illustrates this depiction of God’s wrath in popular culture: <https://youtu.be/cZ06IWHo9Jg>.

Despite so much biblical scholarship to help us see that the church’s teachings about hell came much later in time and were really based on people’s fears and hatreds and not on solid biblical foundations. What surprised Dr. Hart was the venomous reactions by many Christians against his scholarship. In his article for the New York Times on January 10th of this year, Hart shares that there is something deep in our egos that connects with the idea of hell. He writes, “How can we be winners, after all, if there are no losers? Where’s the joy in getting into the gated community and the private academy if it turns out that the gates are merely decorative and the academy has an inexhaustible scholarship program for the underprivileged? What success can there be that isn’t validated by another’s failure? What heaven can there be for us without an eternity in which to relish the impotent envy of those outside its walls?”

Hart continues to make his point by telling a story, “An old monk on Mount Athos in Greece once told me that people rejoice in the thought of hell to the precise degree that they harbor hell within themselves. By which he meant, I believe, that heaven and hell alike are both within us all, in varying degrees, and that, for some, the idea of hell is the treasury of their most secret, most cherished hopes - the hope of being proved right when so many were wrong, of being admired when so many are despised, of being envied when so many have been scorned.”

This article spoke to me because I believe that much of what we project onto God comes from our own struggle to forgive and release the anger and hurt we experience in life. People disappoint and hurt us, intentionally and unintentionally. We hurt others in the same way. We even have a hard time forgiving ourselves. Yet, we do have a choice in this. Our choice is how to move forward after an injury had occurred.

In the verses that precede this parable, Jesus gives his followers a healthy way to resolve conflict that does not seek revenge or violence. He follows that process with a parable to help his followers understand the importance of practicing forgiveness on a regular basis.

We can read the parable today and easily miss its shocking nature which Jesus intended in order to reverse the people’s understanding of forgiveness. The parable is shocking because the king would have been the symbol of corruption and power in Jesus’ time. Also, we have here the unjust system of slavery when people couldn’t pay their debts,

they became slaves. And the amount of money that the slave owed to the king was so tremendous. Here are some interesting pieces of information to consider:

- A single talent is equivalent to 15 years of wages.
- 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of 150,000 year of labor
- The amount that the servant was owed by his friend was only 100 denarii which equaled 100 days' wages
-

The difference between what was owed by servant and the friend was astronomical! To really make the point, Jesus used these huge numbers so as to shock his listeners by telling them that this kind of forgiveness came from a king who is supposed to be corrupt and unforgiving! This must have shocked the listeners. Not only the amount was so incredible, but also the person who forgave was not a person who would normally forgive others their financial debts. These people were his slaves. He owned them because they couldn't pay their debts. So, by forgiving the debt, the king was basically setting the slave free. The king must have seemed crazy. The listeners would have thought, "No way would a king do such a thing!" They would have been shocked to even imagine such forgiveness. Jesus shocked his listeners with the use of this image to show them that God's forgiveness was limitless, even absurd, and their image of a vengeful God was to be transformed. Jesus was telling them that if even a corrupt king could be so forgiving, then how much more would God be! That is the shock of the values of the kingdom of God. They turn our "normal" expectations upside down.

It seems that Jesus is asking for something that is impossible for human beings. How do we practice this kind of forgiveness when most of us would prefer to send those who hurt us to hell? Here is a short video by Richard Rohr about our struggle with forgiveness and why Jesus spent so much time teaching about forgiveness: <https://youtu.be/ghxiSk9suNs>

"Forgiveness is an attitude of forgiving reality for being what it is, forgiving an imperfect world.... It's in your struggle with the wound that you move from unconsciousness to consciousness." - Richard Rohr

Some of the trouble we have with Jesus' teachings about forgiveness comes from our misunderstandings of what forgiveness is. The concept of forgiveness is often misused to mean that we would let bad things be done to us or to expect others to forgive us when we continue to harm them. So it is important to remember that forgiveness is not pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, denying, or even reconciling. It does not condone violence, abuse, or injustice. It does not release others from the consequences of their behavior. Forgiveness is essentially a unilateral, private choice, a necessary first step in freeing oneself from carrying the heavy burden of resentment over past hurts. It sets the stage for such future possibilities as reconciliation and restoring broken relationships. Forgiveness is a force, an energy that comes from the heart. Forgiveness is more a process than a onetime decision. The process of forgiveness helps us to open ourselves to transformation from needing to be perfect or to make our circumstances perfect to knowing our inner goodness that comes from the divine presence in our hearts.

As you walked in today, you were given a quote about forgiveness. I invite you to share it with your neighbor and any forgiveness reflections that you may have.

Here is a video of someone who experienced that kind of forgiveness in her heart <https://youtu.be/xRtt32TZEVE>.

Here is the story about the power of forgiveness by Kim Phuc Phan, the young girl who was running naked in the famous picture from the war in Viet Nam. This is from Kim's own words: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91964687>

“On June 8, 1972, I ran out from Cao Dai temple in my village, Trang Bang, South Vietnam; I saw an airplane getting lower and then four bombs falling down. I saw fire everywhere around me. Then I saw the fire over my body, especially on my left arm. My clothes had been burned off by fire. I was 9 years old but I still remember my thoughts at that moment: I would be ugly and people would treat me in a different way. My picture was taken in that moment on Road No. 1 from Saigon to Phnom Penh. After a soldier gave me some drink and poured water over my body, I lost my consciousness. Several days after, I realized that I was in the hospital, where I spent 14 months and had 17 operations.

It was a very difficult time for me when I went home from the hospital. Our house was destroyed; we lost everything and we just survived day by day.

Although I suffered from pain, itching and headaches all the time, the long hospital stay made me dream to become a doctor. But my studies were cut short by the local government. They wanted me as a symbol of the state. I could not go to school anymore.

The anger inside me was like a hatred as high as a mountain. I hated my life. I hated all people who were normal because I was not normal. I really wanted to die many times. I spent my daytime in the library to read a lot of religious books to find a purpose for my life. One of the books that I read was the Holy Bible.

In Christmas 1982, I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. It was an amazing turning point in my life. God helped me to learn to forgive -the most difficult of all lessons. It didn't happen in a day and it wasn't easy. But I finally got it.

Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed.

Napalm is very powerful but faith, forgiveness and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope and forgiveness. If that little girl in the picture can do it, ask yourself: Can you?” Amen.

