

T. S. Eliot, an early 20th century poet, once compared the Church to a hippopotamus that “rests on his belly in the mud.” (T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, “The Hippopotamus,” 30) Toward the end the poem the unexpected happens. “I saw the ‘potamus take wing Ascending from the damp savannas, And quiring angels round him sing The praise of God, in loud hosannas.”

There are moments when I glimpse and feel the New Testament vision of the Church, and my soul prepares to take wing, but I can’t sustain it. I can’t sustain it for five minutes. I fall back with a thud, an earthbound beast immersed once again on his muddy riverbed. But I can’t forget the memory of what I glimpsed. It haunts me. Jesus’ parable of forgiveness gave me my most recent glimpse.

Working my way through this parable felt like walking through the receding surf at the beach, as it sucks at your feet, gluing you to earth. “We may call [this parable] exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish;” (see Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, 16) but we will never call it dull. I may be dull in what I say, and you may be dull in how you hear; but the parable itself is dynamite. It is a perfect example of what G. K. Chesterton once said: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found hard and left untried.” (*What’s Wrong with the World*.)

I want to caution you: If you experience this parable as an obligation to be met or a burden to be carried, it will crush you. But if you experience it as an invitation to soar, it will set your heart on fire with joy.

The Parable

The parable started with an exchange between Jesus and Peter. **Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”** (Matthew 18:21)

Have you ever had someone offend you multiple times? In a gush of good will you forgive the person the first time it happened, and things seemed to get back on track. Then, it happened again. This time, your guard goes up. You say, “Burn me once, shame on you. Burn me twice, shame on me.” The push back against the person becomes strong.

So, Peter had to be feeling pretty good that he was willing to forgive the guy up to seven times. That’s a lot of times to forgive the same person, who has offended you. I’m impressed. Way to go, Peter! You da man! In about a nanosecond Jesus disabused Peter of any self-congratulation. **Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** (Matthew 18:22)

Seventy-seven times! Whatever happened to justice? Justice means that people get what’s coming to them; and if the guy who offended you seven times melts away like a slug on the sidewalk, then good! He deserves it. Everybody knows that. Everybody feels that way. Jesus didn’t see it that way. Forgive him seventy-seven times? What is going on here? And since the look on Peter’s face suggested that Peter might have issues with seventy-seven times, Jesus told the following parable. You’ll have to decide if it made Peter feel any better.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (an ancient form of money) was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the

debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.” Best day of his life!

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (another ancient form of money). He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’” he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.”

The king in the parable represents God. The 10,000 talents represent the impossible debt one of the servants owed the king. The 100 denarii represent the debt one servant owed another. The two servants represent servants of God. The lesson of the parable is hard: **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”** (Matthew 18:35)

If this were the only time Jesus said that, it would be hard enough. But I can think of four other occasions when He said the same thing. It bears witness to the centrality of forgiveness in the will of God.

Sorting Out the Parable

This parable can make you feel unsettled or just numb. We need some time for our system to adjust to what we just heard. Talking about some of the parable’s details will buy us some time. For example, the two numbers, 10,000 and 100 tell a story. 100 is 1% of 10,000. That’s one way of measuring the difference in the debts the two men owed. The magnitude of the difference increases, when we realize that a denarius was worth only a fraction of the value of a talent. Jesus was not being subtle. “You won’t forgive pennies, when the king forgave you thousands?”

The numbers tell us something else. It’s not subtle either, but it’s easy to overlook. The 10,000 talents represent our debt to God whom we have offended. The 100 denarii represent the debt owed to you by someone who offended you. This comparison starts to mess with your mind. Peter was feeling pretty good about forgiving the same guy seven times, and we fume about justice and people getting what; coming to them. And Jesus says in His numerical way, “Have you thought about God? Have you thought about how many times you have asked Him to forgive you for the same thing? Have you thought about what you deserve for doing the same sins over and over, including the ones you don’t ask Him to forgive. Have you ever thought about how deep a hole you are in?”

I like to picture Jesus going on to say, “Let me help you answer those questions? Which guy in my parable was in a deeper hole: the one who owed 10,000 talents or the one who owed 100 denarii? I just want you to think about this: the hole you are in with God is the same as the guy, who owed 10,000 talents. The hole the other person is in for

offending you is the same as the guy, who owed 100 denarii. So, before you talk about how unrealistic and how unfair and how impossible it is to forgive someone 77 times, I want you to be realistic about God. You know the real harm that other people have done to you. You know how they hurt you, how you can't forget it, can't get over it. I want you to imagine something 10,000 times worse. That's what the human family has done to God. Can you feel the love of God, who is prepared to forgive that monumental debt?

"If you can't feel that, you'll never receive my parable as anything but an obligation to be met. It will crush you. Don't miss the love of God at the heart of all things, inviting you to receive and imitate His forgiveness."

Pastoral Perspective

I have two responsibilities in presenting this parable. One is to present as faithfully as I can Jesus' meaning. Second is to present that meaning in a pastoral way. I have presented Jesus' meaning, and I need to say one more thing that is true about all great moral teachers. They state their teaching in clear, non-negotiable ways - no exceptions, no excuses. Jesus did that. When you hear this parable, you feel like you have no room to move, no way out. It's very uncomfortable. I feel it just as much as you do, and there are times when I don't like it any more than you do.

Why did Jesus have to be so uncompromising? In matters of life and death the great moral teachers are clear and uncompromising. You can see why. It won't do to say to people, "You need to be forgiving on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday you don't have to worry about forgiving." Uncompromising clarity is especially necessary in our culture where so much moral life lives in shades of gray. It is also necessary in our relationship with God. We have to know what God expects of us. His expectations give urgency to our lives. So, let those who teach the will of God be clear and uncompromising.

On the other hand, handling matters of life and death in a pastoral manner requires me to take into account the circumstances in which we obey Jesus' teaching. When Jesus told Peter to forgive his offending brother 77 times **from your heart**, He was focused on the necessity of forgiveness. That's not negotiable. That's His task as a teacher of righteousness.

Jesus could not possibly take into account all the circumstances of all the people, who would try to practice forgiveness as He taught it. He left that to the pastors and teachers of His Church. He knew that if we obeyed negotiable His command to forgive, we would find ways to work through the terrible circumstances that make forgiveness seem impossible. He gave us the Holy Spirit to help us do that.

So, let me start my pastoral care with the most terrible circumstances. Simon Wiesenthal, a Jew, survived the Holocaust. He became a Nazi hunter, bringing many Nazis to justice. In 1944, while a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in Poland, he cared for wounded German soldiers in a makeshift hospital. One day, he arrived at the hospital and learned that a 21-year-old soldier had asked to speak with him.

The soldier's body was wrapped in bandages. He could hardly speak, but he wanted to confess something terrible. He related to Wiesenthal the time that a detail of soldiers had herded hundreds of Jews into a building and then set fire to it. As Jews fled the building, soldiers opened fire. The young soldier was one of them. He killed one of the families. He told Wiesenthal he wanted to die "in peace," and he had "longed to talk

about (his crime) to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him.” (CT, October 26, 1998, 94ff.)

Wiesenthal said he was “simultaneously attracted to the authenticity of the confession and repelled by the horrifying tale.” “At last,” he wrote, “I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.” He reflected on that awful moment in a book he published 30 years later called *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limitations of Forgiveness*. He addressed anyone who hears this story: “You ... can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, ‘What would I have done?’” (Ibid)

In the 1976 edition of *The Sunflower* he printed a fellow Jew’s answer to the young German. Milton Konvitz wrote: “I cannot speak for your victims. I cannot speak for the Jewish people. I cannot speak for God. But I am a man. I am a Jew ... I have been taught that if I expect the Compassionate One to have compassion on me, I must act with compassion toward others ... insofar as I can separate myself from my fellow Jews, for whom I cannot speak, my broken heart pleads for your broken heart: Go in peace.” (Ibid)

I want to say two things about his words. First, forgiveness can be done in the most awful circumstances we can imagine. It may take 30 years, but it can be done. Second, I want to say Milton Konvitz, “Sir, you are not far from the kingdom of God.” A parable is a word picture that helps us to spot God’s present in the world. When we see people forgiving those who have offended them in great and small ways, we can say with confidence: “That’s the kingdom; God is there; God is at work.”

Take Aways

So, how do I discharge my love for you and offer you the pastoral advice you need to take this parable to heart? First, when you first teach a child math, you don’t start with differential equations. When we practice forgiveness, it is better not to start with killers, abusers, and traitors. Start with the people who snub you, bully you, disrespect you, and cheat you. If we can’t forgive them, we’ll never forgive the monsters.

Second, Jesus’ parable is not a weapon. Don’t turn it into a weapon. The first rule of medicine is: Do no harm. It’s not a bad rule for healers of the soul. Be careful how you preach to other people that they should forgive everybody. You can crush them. You don’t know what kind of damage they have suffered at the hands of another person. Careful diagnosis of what an unforgiving person has suffered is crucial. The diagnosis and the forgiveness take time, maybe decades, and however long it takes, the healer models the tender mercies of God, which alone teach us to forgive.

Third, Jesus’ command to forgive stands, however horrible the circumstances. So, whom do you have to forgive?

Fourth, do you know what it means to be over your head in debt to God? That is the human condition, and each of us has a share in it so big that we can never pay it off. Acknowledge your complicity in this debt to God.

Do you know what it means to have your share of the debt cancelled? That is the gospel. Christ died for our sins, all our sins, the whole debt. **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their sins against them.** (2 Corinthians 5:19) In the language of Jesus’ parable: **The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** Do you believe that? Then you are free indeed. You are free to love God. You are free to forgive those who trespass against you, even 77 times.