

600 Million Dollar Forgiveness

A sermon by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

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Once upon a time, a king wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
And when he began the reckoning,
a slave was brought before him who owed 600 million dollars.

Now...wait right there...600 million dollars???

Well, yes.

And here's why.

In our text today, the slave in question owed the king
ten thousand talents.

A single talent – just one –
represented more than a full year of wages,
for a manual laborer in the ancient world.

So I got to 600 million by doing some calculating.

In 2016,

the Census Bureau reported that the median household income
in the United States
was about 60,000 dollars.

So I went ahead and multiplied 60,000
by the 10,000 years of labor represented by talents in our parable.
So, our modern equivalent of 10,000 talents is, in fact,
something like 600 million dollars...600 MILLION.

It's an impossible amount.
An unimaginable amount.
An amount so big as to be absurd:
an amount that no average person could ever conceive of owing.

And this is very provocative, I think.
Because with numbers this big being thrown around,
we quickly get the idea that there's something unusual
happening in this parable...
something more than initially meets the eye.

Indeed, commentator Charles Campbell concludes that this parable
leads its hearers right into the realm of hyperbolic imagination.
Campbell argues:

“The realm of hyperbolic imagination seeks to startle hearers,
to open our "myopic vision,"
and to stir our imagination from numbness.
[In the realm of hyperbolic imagination, we]
encounter a "rhetoric of excess" —
the poetics of the impossible,
rather than the prose of the probable.”

Campbell continues:

“such rhetoric of excess, like the reign of God it proclaims,
interrupts business as usual
and subverts the presuppositions of the status quo.
As such, Jesus' rhetoric of excess
interrupts and subverts Peter's assumption
that he can calculate and measure and limit
the practice of forgiveness.”¹

Indeed, the use of big numbers
is meant to transport us – launch us –
out of our usual calculating mindsets.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Proper 19).*

Big numbers are meant to transport us into a world where grace and forgiveness is so wide and deep, so absurdly abundant, and so richly experienced....
...that it becomes almost impossible to avoid forgiving. Forgiveness, on this magnitude, is so contagious that to remain unforgiving becomes practically unthinkable. In Campbell's words:
"absurd grace renders obscene – **obscene!** – the actions of the unforgiving slave."

Now, here's the rub, as I see it. This passage presumes that hearers will be moved to forgiveness after fully realizing just how dramatically and extravagantly they themselves have been forgiven. This seems to be the logic inherent in the passage. God forgives our endless debts and sins and trespasses, just as the king forgives his slave's 600 million dollar debt.

But in all honesty, most of us don't feel like we're **that** prolifically sinful. Most of us don't think we're really quite bad enough to need 600 million dollars worth of forgiveness. We're not perfect, but we're trying. And we really don't mess up that badly, or that often. So this whole forgiveness thing doesn't always fully compute for us. Do basically good people really need this much forgiveness???

Furthermore: few, if any of us, I would venture...
...live in worlds where financial debts get forgiven.
It just doesn't happen.
So it's pretty far beyond our comprehension and our imagination.

As a result, then, **big forgiveness**,
600 million dollar forgiveness,
just isn't something for which
we seem to have much of an appetite.
We don't really see ourselves as – in the words of the old prayerbook –
“miserable offenders,”
as people in need to bulk quantities of God's lavish forgiveness.
And for the most part, that's probably a fairly good thing.
We've developed a more positive view of human nature
than our forebears had.
And yet, without a strong account of human sinfulness,
it can be more difficult for us to access
important aspects of Jesus' teaching.

Because of this difficulty, then...
I'm wondering...wondering if it might help to think of forgiveness
less as a response to specific acts,
less in terms of action and reaction.
I'm wondering if, instead, it might help to think about forgiveness
more as an ambiance,
an atmosphere,
an environmental condition, almost.

What if **big forgiveness**
doesn't primarily mean an endless supply
of “get out of jail free” cards.

What if, instead, **forgiveness** is imagined
as a context, a milieu, a situation, a place...
...an environment that helps us to be

the most forgiving, generous, gracious versions of ourselves?

An environment that makes goodness
almost second nature,
almost easy?

An environment in which we feel free to admit our mistakes,
and are supported as we learn to do better?

Can you imagine such an environment?

Such a place?

Such an atmosphere?

What would it be like?

Can you imagine opening a door
and walking smack dab into the middle of Forgiveness?

What would you see?

Hear?

Taste?

Touch?

Smell?

What would it be like to live IN forgiveness?

To dwell IN forgiveness?

To know that no matter how hard you fall,
you will be picked up.

Picked up,

dusted off,

given a hot meal,

a warm bath,

a clean-sheeted bed,

and a chance to begin again.

Because no one is permanently bad,

and no one is irredeemable.

It just takes a little time in Forgiveness' house
to get the hang of a different way of being.

Indeed, forgiveness is a place where,
in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews,
we “consider how to provoke one another
to love and good deeds.”

Forgiveness is also a place where,
in the words of the Apostle Paul,
“we do not live to ourselves,
and we do not die to ourselves”
because whether we live
or whether we die
we are God’s.

We are God’s.
All together.
Learning how to forgive and be forgiven.

Yet, so often we think that we’re all on our own.
So often we act like we’re all on our own.

A major function of being the church, then,
as I see it,
is to refute this idolatry of independence.
Our deepest human desire is for freedom,
and yet we so easily accept counterfeit goods,
so easily convince ourselves
that independence *is* the same as freedom.

But what if real freedom is actually to found in depending?
The freedom of having people upon whom we can depend.
The freedom others have because they can depend on us?
The freedom of knowing that there’s a whole crew of people
who have our backs...
...who are rooting for us to become
all that God made us to be...
...who strive to draw out our kindness, generosity, and graciousness.

And what if church was really about THAT?
What if church was about becoming **sanctuary** for one another?
What if church was a school of forgiveness?
A place to stand together before God,
to tremble at the incredible grace on offer...
...and to tremble at the kinds of lives
that accepting such grace would create.
Lives of radical generosity and forgiveness:
lives we're not really sure are possible...or maybe even desirable.

It take a whole community to help us desire something counter-cultural,
to help us be good in a world
that rewards lying, cheating, and stealing...
...to help us learn to truly love one another as God loves us.
And I've always had this hope, you see,
this hope that the church could be such a revolutionary place.

Maybe you've had that hope, too.
Maybe that's why you're here.
Because you can imagine another world.
Because you desire another world.
And because you know
that you need to spend some time dwelling in Forgiveness,
basking in Forgiveness,
to become someone who can go out and forgive
with the joy and abandon that sings the new creation into being.

So what if...
what if...God is trying to make us a place of forgiveness?
What if God wants to put up a new sign on our churchyard wall?
"St. Peter's School of Forgiveness: Now In Session"
What if God wants to make us agents of reconciliation,
in spite of our best attempts to just come and enjoy the beautiful music
and the comforting ritual,

and the strong words.

What if God has bigger plans...far bigger plans?

I take Paul's words in 2nd Corinthians
to be almost the whole point of doing and being
this odd thing called church.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new!
All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
So we are ambassadors for Christ,
since God is making his appeal through us;
we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Is this what we're up to, church?
Forgiveness? Reconciliation?
And if not, what ARE we doing?
And why?
Let us ponder these things together,
in the depths of our hearts.

Amen.