

## **By the Book**

This isn't the sermon I thought I was going to preach when my week began.

I started out on Monday writing a sermon about the prophet Elisha and a leper named Naaman, but then, because of a decision I made weeks ago, I had an encounter this week that provoked a much different sermon.

If you read my blog, then you know that a few weeks ago I made a Lenten commitment that once or twice a week I would strap a clergy collar around my neck, which I usually only wear to weddings and graveside burials.

I made a commitment that I'd strap a collar on and go to some public space, like a coffee shop or pub or cafe, and just see what conversations came my way by exposing my faith and vocation in plain sight.

Since then I've worn it to Starbucks a couple of times.

Last week, I went to Barnes and Noble.

This past week I went to Whole Foods to eat lunch in the cafe and sketch what I had planned on being a very different sermon.

I sat down in a booth with my food and a few books about the prophet Elisha.

And aside from the check-out guy asking me who I was going to vote for- for Pope- it was an uneventful day.

And I was about to call it a day, when a woman pushing a grocery cart crept up to my booth and said: ***'Um, excuse me Father...could I?'***

She gestured to the empty seat across from me.

***'Well, I'm not exactly a Fa\_\_\_\_\_'*** I started to say but she just looked confused.

***'Never mind'*** I said. ***'Sit down.'***

She looked to be somewhere in her 40's. She had long, dark hair and hip, horn-rimmed glasses and pale skin that had started to blush red.

No sooner had she sat down than she started having second thoughts.

***'Maybe this is a mistake. I feel ridiculous and I just interrupted you. I just saw you over here and I haven't been to church in years...'***

She fussed with the zipper on her coat while she rambled, embarrassed.

***'It's just...I've been carrying this around for years and I can't put it down.'***

***'Put what down?'*** I asked.

***'Where do I start? You don't even know me, which is probably why I'm sitting here in the first place.'*** She laughed and wiped the corner of her eye.

***'Beginning at the beginning usually works'*** I said.

***'Yeah,'*** she said absent-minded, she was already rehearsing her story in her head.

And then she told it to me. She confessed.

About her husband and their marriage.

About his drinking, the years of it.

About his lies, the years of it.

About her making every effort to help him, to stick by him, to do whatever it took to keep their marriage together.

She told me about how he's sober now.

And then she told me about how now the addiction in their family is her anger and resentment over how she'll never get back what she gave out, how she'll never receive what she spent.

Then she bit her lip and paused- like she was mentally censoring a part of it.

And so I asked her: ***'Are you asking me if you're supposed to forgive him?'***

***'No, I know I'm supposed to forgive him'*** she said. ***'My priest told me that years ago- that's when I stopped going to church. I know I'm supposed to forgive.'***

***'What's your question then?'*** I asked.

***'Why can't I just wipe this from my ledger....and move on?'***

***'I've sacrificed enough. He's the one who owes me. Why does forgiving him just make me feel like a victim all over again?'***

And when she said that, I knew I had to write a different sermon.

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When Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness, when Peter asks Jesus if forgiving someone 7 times is sufficient, Peter must've thought it was a good answer.

Peter's a brown-noser. Peter wouldn't have raised his hand and volunteered if he thought it was the wrong answer.

After all Moses had said an eye for an eye, do in turn what was done to you but no more. So 7 times must have struck Peter as a generous, Jesusy amount of forgiveness.

I mean, think about that. Imagine someone sins against you. Say, a church member gossips about you behind your back. I'm not suggesting anyone in this church would do that, just take it as an illustration.

Imagine someone gossips about you behind your back. And you confront them about it.

1. And they say: 'I'm sorry.' So you say to them: 'I forgive you.'
2. And then they do it again. And you forgive them.
3. And then they do it again. And you forgive them.
4. And then they do it again. And you forgive them.
5. And then they do it again. And you forgive them.
6. And then they do it again for sixth time. And you forgive them.

I mean...fool me once shame on you. Fool 2,3,4,5,6 times...how many times does it take until its shame on me?

It's got to stop somewhere, right?

And Peter suggests drawing the line at 7 times.

7 is a good, biblical number and, whether we're talking about gossip or anger or adultery, 7 is a whole lot of forgiveness.

So Peter must've thought it was a good answer; Peter must've expected a pat on the back, gold star from Jesus. But he doesn't get one.

Instead Jesus says: **'You're off by about 483.'** Not 7 times but 70 times 7.

490 times. And it's even worse than it sounds.

490 was a Jewish way of expressing perfection. Infinity.

So Jesus is saying there is no limit to forgiveness, that forgiving someone is something we never get done with. It's something that goes on forever.

That forgiveness is not a favor we offer 490 times but when we finally get to 491 we can stop.

No, Jesus is saying that forgiveness is a way of life that never ends.

And as he likes to do, Jesus goes straight from answer to illustration and tells a story that starts with grace and ends with hell.

***‘And oh, by the way,’*** Jesus tacks on, ***‘that’s exactly what God will do with you unless you forgive in your heart.’***

On the surface that’s a really crappy story.

You must forgive or else. You must forgive or else your heavenly father will lock you in hell and throw away the key? You must forgive...out of fear?

That doesn’t sound like Jesus- at all.

So, there’s got to be more going on in this story than you can hear the first time through.

In fact, what we need is a couple more takes to notice what’s going on in Jesus’ parable.

So what I need is a few volunteers...

The story revolves around 3 main characters: a King, a servant and a fellow servant.

**Take One: Re-narrate Matthew 18.23-34**

So in the beginning, the king opens his ledger to settle accounts, and he finds a servant who owes him 10,000 talents.

The amount of the debt is key to the whole logic of Jesus' story. In case you're rusty on your biblical exchange rates:

1 Denarius = 1 Day's Wages

6,000 Denarii = 1 Talent

This servant owes the king 10,000 talents. When you do the math and carry the one- that comes out to roughly 60 million days' wages or 164 years and 3 months of labor.

So when Jesus tells the story, Peter and the other disciples would've known instantly that this man owes a debt he could never possibly repay. It's not just a large debt; its an un-repayable debt.

But no sooner is the man forgiven his debt and set free than he encounters a fellow servant who owes him, about 3 months wages. No small amount but small potatoes compared to the debt he owed the king.

So even though he's been forgiven and set free he grabs the man, chokes him, demands what's owed him and sends the man to prison, ignoring the very same plea had pled: ***'be patient with me...'***

And when the king finds out he has failed to extend the same mercy he had received, the King has him thrown in jail to be tortured until all his debt is repaid, to be tortured.

To be tortured for 10,000 talents worth of time. 60 million days.

## **Take Two: Re-narrate Matthew 18.23-34**

Here's a question:

Why does the king cancel the debt? Because of the servant's plea? Because he promises to pay back everything he owes? 60 million days worth of wages?

He can't ever pay that back.

So if the king forgives the servant because the servant promises to make it up to him, then the king is stupid.

The king just forgives him. Gratuitously. The king offers him grace.

And how does the servant respond?

Immediately he leaves the king and then turns to a fellow servant and demands from his peer what he has coming to him.

Somehow this servant has managed to receive the king's forgiveness yet he's remained completely unchanged by it.

He's been forgiven something he could never repay.

He's been spared a punishment that should have been his.

He's been offered grace and somehow its not converted his heart or his character.

He's still the same person he was before.

The king's grace has not made him a person of grace.



### **Take Three: Re-narrate Matthew 18.23-34**

Here's another question: what happens to the debt? In the story?

The king examines his ledger and sees what's owed him. But when he forgives the servant, what happens to the debt?

Where does that debt go? What's the king do with his ledger?

Because the debt doesn't just disappear. Someone has to pay the debt—that's the way the world works, that's the way accounting works.

And this servant can never pay what is owed. So who eats the debt?

The king.

The king pays the debt.

The king will have to suffer the cost of this un-payable debt because forgiveness always costs someone something.

But notice, it's not just that the king pays the debt.

It's not just that because the king can't forgive the servant without in some way tossing the ledger book aside once and for all.

Because there's nothing this servant can ever do to bring his relationship with the king back in the black.

So when the king forgives the servant, the king also sacrifices the ledger.

Keeping tally of what's been earned and what's still owed goes by the wayside for good.

The whole system of settling accounts, of keeping score, of positive and negative, of + and -, of red and black, of credits and debits, of giving and receiving exactly what is owed- the king DIES to that way of life.

He gets rid of the ledger, so that a servant can have new life.

But notice.

After the king gets rid of his ledger, who's still got one? Watch.

Watch the ledger.

#### **Take Four: Re-narrate Matthew 18.23-34**

The king gets rid of his ledger, but who's still got one?

Who's still keeping score? Who's still keeping track of what people owe him? Who's still recording what he's earned? Who's still tallying what he deserves from others but still hasn't gotten?

You see, the king throws his ledger away. Gone for good.

But the servant clings to his ledger.

And he takes his ledger with him, all the way to hell.

In other words, Jesus says, if you insist on treating other people by the book then God will give you exactly what you want. And treat you by the book.

***'Why can't I just wipe the ledger clean and move on? Why does forgiving him make me feel like a victim all over again?'*** the woman at WF asked me.

I sipped the last of my coffee.

And I said: ***'That's kinda the way it's supposed to feel.'***

I could tell from her face she didn't follow.

So I tried to explain: ***'The way we forgive is just a small-scale version of how God forgives. There's no way to reconciliation that doesn't first go through pain and suffering. Jesus is the pattern. Forgiveness means you bear the cost instead of making the other person pay what they owe you.'***

***'That's a sucky answer'*** she said.

***'Sure it sucks'*** I said. ***'It sucked for Jesus too, remember.'***

***'Do you talk like this in church?'*** she asked. ***'No, never.'***

***'Look, the debt your husband owes you is real, but forgiveness means you absorb that debt. And, yes, it's painful and, sure, it's hard, but that's the only way to resurrection.'***

***'Like I said,'*** she said, ***'it'd be a lot better if I could just wipe the ledger clean and move on.'***

***'Yeah, but if you wipe that part of it clean it won't be long before some other part of it shows red. It's not about wiping the ledger clean. It's about getting rid of the ledger altogether.'***

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Pay Attention:

No more pretending. That woman at Whole Foods, and that servant in the story, they're not the only ones clinging to their ledger.

Let's not kid ourselves.

Some of you carry around a ledger filled with lists of names:

Names of people who've hurt you.

Names of people who've taken something from you.

Names of people who've wronged you.

People who've cheated you or cheated on you.

Who've lied to you or who've lied about you.

People who refuse to listen to you, or to understand you, or to accept you.

People who've betrayed you, who've rubbed you the wrong the way, or who've just let you down one too many times.

And in many of your ledgers, you have a whole other list of names, people that no matter what they do, there's nothing they can do to change their name from the red to the black in your book.

Some of you cling to ledgers filled with balance sheets, keeping score of exactly how much you've done for the people in your life compared to how little they've done for you.

Some of you cling to marriage ledgers, tallying the precise daily cash flow of what each person brings to the marriage, which person is costing the marriage more and which person is sacrificing more, working more, contributing more. To the marriage.

And some of you cling to ledgers that look more like a list of accomplishments:

How much you've done for others.

How much you've given to your church.

How much you attend worship.

All the reasons why you *think*, assume, God should love you.

While others of you can't let go.

Can't let go of ledgers that list all the sinful things you've ever done. All the things you're ashamed of. All the things you wish you could change about yourself. All the things you wish you could take back.

Ledgers filled with all the reasons why you're secretly convinced God can never love you.

This sanctuary should not be a place where we lie: there are as many ledgers in this room as there are people. And, hell, I have my own.

But Jesus wants us to know that we've got to put them down.

To get rid of them. Toss them aside. Die to that whole way of living.

Because clinging to this (the ledger) makes an idol out of that (the cross). Because if you're still holding on to this, that's just a symbol from a story that happened once upon a time to someone else.

I mean, let's be honest. Some of you have gone to church your whole lives and you're no different than you were before. The grace of the King has not made you a grace-filled person.

And it's because you're still holding on to this. When it comes to you, you want the King to throw the book away. But when it comes to everyone else in your life, you insist on going by the book.

But clinging to this, going through your life going by the book, needing to keep score, needing to tally and balance the accounts, it makes that (the cross) an idol.

It makes it nothing more than an object- because you're worshipping the object and not its meaning.

Because the good news of the cross is that you're more sinful than you'll ever admit but you're more loved than you could ever imagine.

The good news of the cross is that there is nothing, *nothing*, nothing, you can do to earn God's love.

And there's nothing you can do to lose it.

God doesn't keep score. God doesn't go by the book.

Because the King has tossed his ledger in the trash. And despite the cost, he's paid every debt. **Every** debt. And that includes, by the way, the debts that everyone in your life owe to you.

So put the ledger down. Put it down. Get rid of it. Die to it.

And instead tit-for-tat, instead of quid pro quo, instead 1 for 1, you do this and I'll do that, eye for an eye, try 70 x 7.

Show mercy.

Every time.

Just as the King has shown mercy to you.