

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm
Part 3: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Niantic Community Church

November 19, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 20 is a stark yet enlightening tale from the Gospels. We briefly touched on this story during worship months ago, and I promised a deeper dive later. Now is that time.

In the parable, a servant owes his king an enormous sum: 10,000 talents, which, in modern terms, translates to just shy of a staggering \$7 billion. The king, refusing to extend his servant's debt limit, demands immediate payment. Unable to pay, the servant faces the sale of his family and possessions. However, upon pleading, the king mercifully forgives the entire debt.

This parable is not just a story about financial debts; it's a metaphor for divine forgiveness. The king represents God, and the forgiven debt symbolizes forgiven sins. Jesus uses this narrative to show God's boundless mercy – mercy that Jesus trusted and invoked on the Cross when he prayed that God would forgive even those who crucified him.

The parable takes a turn when the forgiven servant encounters another who owes him the modern equivalent of \$11,000. Despite his own experience with mercy, he shows none, sending the debtor to prison. The king, learning of this, rebukes the servant for not extending the same mercy he received and condemns him to torture until his debt is repaid. Jesus concludes with a warning that God will treat us similarly if we don't forgive others sincerely.

Now, should you fail to give as freely as you have received, I do not believe this parable indicates that God will torture you in hell for not being gracious. I just think that it is impossible to fully accept your own forgiveness if you refuse to forgive others. So, you are tortured by your own debt coming back to haunt you – through your own actions, not that of God.

You've heard me say this before, but the governing principle seems to be that you and I can have as much Grace as we could ever need in this life when we turn ourselves over into the hands of God. Yet we only get to keep the Grace that we can also give away. Don't we pray every week, "forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us*"?

I said months ago that we would circle back to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant for a reason. This unusual parable is, in part, responsible for the reason why I continue to call myself a Christian when so many others have left the faith. It is also responsible for an extraordinary amount of healing that took place in my life about six months before I arrived in Niantic.

I want to tell you my story.

When I departed from Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Nebraska, in 2020, I was aware that I might be embarking on the most challenging pastorate of my ministry in Portland,

Oregon. The Pacific Northwest is part of the "Unchurched Belt," a region where "no religion" is the most commonly selected option on religious surveys. The church I joined, founded in 1871, may be considered young by Niantic standards but it is one of the oldest in Portland, situated in the heart of the city. This location meant it was at the epicenter of all the chaos you saw broadcasted on television during the pandemic. Although the sanctuary seats 800, the membership had dwindled to 200, with an average age of about 75. Furthermore, the church had seen the abrupt departures of the last two settled ministers and an interim minister amid conflict.

Despite these challenges, I was not deterred. The three congregations I had previously served were all experiencing distress when I began, yet I had left each strengthened and actively involved in impactful ministries. I had a perfect track record. My confidence was less in my abilities and more in the Holy Spirit's capacity to enact change through those who are open to the Spirit's help and guidance. I was open, and I felt the Spirit was directing me to this church. So, with a sense of divine calling, I left Omaha for Portland.

Upon my arrival, I discovered that the congregation, while housing some truly extraordinary individuals, was rather well known among my clergy colleagues for an abusive culture that had alienated members, staff, and clergy alike. Ironically, this was the most proudly "progressive" congregation I had ever served. Yet, as my pastoral mentor, Bruce Van Blair, often remarked, "It is amazing how much pride, prejudice, self-righteousness, and malice can be crammed into an open mind."

That first year, despite the culture and the pandemic, I made significant headway. I was hopeful that the influx of revitalizing energy could cleanse the toxicity from the congregation. However, this optimism was shattered when a trusted retired minister in the congregation misinterpreted a confidential conversation and mistakenly believed I was planning to leave. I had not the slightest intention of leaving. Yet, in an abusive culture, subjective views become "truth," and fear supplants faith, and vengeance is counted as virtue. This minister aimed to ruin my ministry and cause me as much personal distress as he could inflict.

I won't revisit the trauma inflicted by this individual or the compounded damage from the church leaders' mishandling of the situation. Suffice it to say, that while the abuse was not sexual, emotionally I felt like I had been raped. Subsequently, I experienced a breakdown that resulted in a medical leave of absence. When the leadership chose silence over action, I resigned, knowing that I would never be safe again in that church.

The aftermath required intense self-reflection and healing, involving a whole lot of prayer and meditation, walks in nature, therapeutic soaks in mineral springs, and counseling. Yet, despite my best efforts, the ordeal left me with an overwhelming sense of rage and despair. I questioned God's presence and purpose in guiding me from a beloved church in Omaha to a destructive situation in Portland. My experience cast doubt on my Christian identity and ministerial future.

What finally shifted my perspective and brought me back to my Christian faith was an epiphany. One day I was driving back home from a hike in the Columbia River Gorge, my head still

swirling with rage and despair. Yet into mix drifted an image of Jesus on the Cross praying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:24) If you wonder why I have repeatedly quoted this line since I’ve been here, this is why. I realized that, when we accept Jesus’s prayer as one made for us, not merely for others, then we become like the servant who owed the king \$7 billion and had his debts wiped clean.

It seems so outlandish and, frankly, unbelievable that God would forgive all of us for all sins – up to and including killing God’s anointed Messiah – but I thought back to the love and grace I experienced in 1981 in the mystical encounter that propelled me into ministry, I knew that Jesus’s prayer was real, and effective. For, in that experience I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that God is not only aware of us, but far more aware of us than we are aware of us; and because of this awareness – and despite it – loves us all beyond our wildest imagination, without a single exception.

You can’t love anyone this way without implicitly forgiving them. Zeroing out their debt. Freeing them to start anew with a clean slate.

Ever since that 1981 experience, I have experienced continual reverberations of this profound – and profoundly forgiving – love. They remind me that God not only loved and forgave me in 1981, but God has never let go. I am as loved and forgiven now as I was then. As I recalled all this on my car ride home, a question welled up within me that went something like this:

“Eric, why are you retaining the offenses of this minister who abused you for but a moment in your life, when I have let go of all your transgressions for your entire life?”

“But wait,” I pushed back. “You can’t make me out to be the Unforgiving Servant here. The guy who owed him money was aware of his debt and begged for mercy. This minister has never acknowledged that he has done anything wrong. Doubtless, he’d do it again if he were able! Isn’t it true that there can be no forgiveness without repentance?”

“It’s not that you *have* to forgive, Eric,” came the internal voice. “It’s just that you *can* forgive.”

It was then that I realized that, through God’s love and forgiveness – demonstrated most fully on the Cross and confirmed by my 1981 experience – I had been made a spiritually wealthy man. Wealthy enough that whatever spiritual debt this minister owed me was but a trifle. Hardly more than a rounding error. I could continue to hang onto this debt, or I could simply write it off and move on.

I chose to forgive. I completely released this man of any debt I could hold against him. This act marked the beginning of genuine healing.

Incidentally, I should note that it is not always prudent to forgive the sins of someone who is unrepentant. For instance, it would not have been wise for me to re-enter that Portland church and expect that, because I had forgiven my abuser, that his behavior would change. It was safe for me to forgive him because I was never going to return to that church again.

Strangely enough, forgiving this man actually brought me a lot of joy. Joy, because it brought my awareness back to what I had, and had to give, rather than what had been taken from me.

We don't talk much in "progressive" churches anymore about the Cross and the implications of Jesus's prayer for the forgiveness of our sins. With think of "sin" as a rather passé, and talk of sin to be a real downer – especially if our own sin and need for forgiveness is the subject. Yet is this precisely the forgiveness of my own spiritual debts that gave me the spiritual wealth to forgive the debt of my abuser.

This connection between Jesus and forgiveness is why I am and will always be a Christian. In my life, the only story that is grand or majestic enough to contain or comprehend my 1981 experience of God's immeasurable love and grace is Christ's death and resurrection. While I am confident that God has ways of making God's extraordinary love known to people of other faiths, I have no need to look beyond Christ's story to find my own.

Which brings my story now to you, Niantic Community Church.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant and Christ's prayer on the Cross rekindled my awareness that I am, indeed, a follower of Jesus. However, it did not convince me that I should continue to be a minister. While my anger began to dissipate, the sting of abuse was so fresh that the thought of committing to another Settled Minister position was daunting. Even when offered an attractive opportunity at a prominent Seattle church, I declined. I realized that the only way I could consider a future in ministry would be to engage in a short-term, Interim role and see what transpired.

Over the past several months, many of you have expressed gratitude for my role in helping to heal this congregation. Now, I want to express my gratitude for your role in facilitating my own healing. When I arrived at NCC last December, I was emotionally prepared to resume ministerial duties, yet I was not ready to contemplate remaining in ministry longer than a single year.

You helped me re-discover the joy of ministry again. You helped me reconnect with the magic and majesty of it.

Day by day, you have reminded me that our churches are still home to many extraordinary people. Faithful, and faith-filled people.

You have helped me regain my sense of purpose, and reminded me that I still have something valuable to share with the world – and that I am valued by others.

For all this, and so much more, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, I want to say something about the church I entered in Niantic a year ago. Upon my arrival, many expressed concerns about the church's treatment of your previous settled minister, Pastor Stephanie. The fear was that Niantic Community Church harbored an abusive culture.

To those who held such concerns, I want to offer two reassurances:

First, having experienced an abusive church culture firsthand, I can assert with confidence that this is not the environment at Niantic Community Church. Yes, mistakes were made during Pastor Stephanie's tenure – and some may have contributed to her departure – but mistakes alone do not constitute an abusive culture.

Second, while what happened between you and Pastor Stephanie is between you and her, what I can say is that, whatever mistakes you may have made with her, you did not make with me. You've been welcoming. You've been supportive. You've been generous. You've been immeasurably kind. You've been healing.

I trust that the same spirit you have extended to me – and Pastor Kaleigh, and our student associate, Jeff Birch – will extend to your new Interim Senior Minister, Rev. Erica. And it will extend beyond Rev. Erica to your new settled minister. If you will just remain your generous selves, continuing to receive, and give, God's love and grace in Christ's name, then you will do just fine. You will continue to grow both in numbers and spirit.

Amen.