

Sunday, September 13, 2026

Sermon: "Choking on Forgiveness"

Matthew 18:21-35 NRSV/UE

Where we're heading in today's message: Forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity it supports our system of faith. But it's in increasingly short supply as we tend to let self-righteousness and revenge replace our capacity for grace/unconditional love.

If you have ever been so hurt by someone that forgiving them seems impossible, the gospel reading for today may increase your discomfort.

It begins with an exchange where Peter asks Jesus whether seven is enough times to forgive someone who had sinned against him, and Jesus responds by saying Peter should forgive the person 77 times. We assume he meant "as many times as forgiveness is needed." It makes clear that Jesus considered forgiving those who have hurt us an important part of Christian life.

Important, no doubt, but not doable for every person who seeks to follow Jesus. Consider the case of Serene Jones.

For all her working life, Serene has been involved with Christian theology. She is an ordained minister in two Protestant denominations. For 17 years, she was a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, and in 2008, she was appointed president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a position she held until her recent retirement.

With that kind of career, we might expect that she would be big on forgiveness, a prime Christian virtue. But there was one relationship in her life where the barriers to forgiving seemed much too high for her.

It was her relationship with her mother. Serene wrote extensively about this in her book, *Call It Grace*, which combines her personal memoir with spiritual teaching that mines the works of great theologians from the past. As she details with multiple examples in the book, her mother, Sarah, was neither a nice person nor a good parent.

It is common for mothers and daughters to clash from time to time, but Serene's mom, Sarah, often seemed hateful toward and resentful of her daughter, even while Serene was a child. For example, when Serene was 5, her mother beat her with a brush for coming home from kindergarten happy. When Serene was 10, Sarah ripped up her daughter's A+ essay because, as Sarah said, it was too smart for someone of Serene's age. There were instances of physical abuse as well, where Sarah pinched Serene, pulled her hair and "accidentally" stepped hard on her daughter's bare feet. Those kinds of things continued on other levels throughout Serene's teenage years. Even after Serene was a grown woman with a successful career and a daughter of her own, her mother continued to belittle and blast her.

Ironically, Sarah worked for almost 20 years as a marriage and family counselor and a spiritual director. From the job, she apparently learned a few things about her own shortcomings, including her vanity, her quick-rising temper, her repressed anger at her own mother's inability to mother her properly, and her feeling that having a child was like having to drag a ball and chain around, and thus she begrudged the presence of Serene. This self-insight from her job led Sarah at one point to apologize for her meanness, but it didn't result in any real change of behavior. Sarah's bad conduct continued into her final years, when she also poured her rage in a cruel and damaging way onto her husband.

In her book, Serene confesses that even after her mother's death, she couldn't swallow the idea of forgiving her.

We'll come back to learn how Serene ultimately came to terms with that, but first let's look at our gospel reading for today. It begins with Peter asking Jesus if seven is enough times to forgive a person and Jesus calling for unlimited forgiveness.

But that was only the first part of the Scripture reading. Jesus went on to tell the parable of the unforgiving servant. This servant was forgiven the enormous debt he owed to the king, but then the servant refused to forgive a much smaller debt that a fellow servant owed him, and he had the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learned of this, he summoned the first servant and said to him, "You

wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (vv. 32-33). The king then handed the servant to a guard for punishment until he paid his debt.

Jesus concluded the parable by saying, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (v. 35). Jesus could hardly have been any plainer about the Christian obligation to forgive those who sin against us. But what do we do, if like Serene Jones, we are choking on forgiving years of abuse or some big betrayal?

Before we leave the gospel reading, let's note that there is a change of vocabulary in it. Throughout most of it, the focus is on forgiveness, with repeated use of the words "forgive" and "forgave." But when the king speaks to the unforgiving servant, he uses the word mercy. In the context of the parable, it may seem that forgiveness and mercy are synonyms, but they are not.

Serene doesn't discuss this Scripture reading in her book. But remember that her book is both memoir and theology, and she uses "mercy" as the title of the chapter in which she discusses her mother. And there she says plainly, "When it came to my relationship with my mother, it was not forgiveness that I needed to summon. The only hope for repair was mercy."

In delving theologically into the two terms, Serene notes that forgiveness is transactional: "A harm happens, the truth of the harm is recognized, and attempts are made to right the wrong, and when a perpetrator asks for it and the victim of the harm agrees, then forgiveness is granted, its healing balm embracing both parties," she explains.

Mercy is different, she says. After acknowledging that in secular use, mercy means releasing someone from deserved punishment, she says that theologically, mercy is that and more. "Divine mercy ... is a one-way street," Serene wrote. "God grants us mercy despite the absence of any human merit. But when knowledge of this mercy is reflected in human lives, it flows in all directions. It occurs whenever, against all odds, human beings choose compassion over punishment. Compassion is at the root of mercy."

Serene adds one more step, however. She says that justice is the struggle to make sure the harms about which we grant mercy stop. She says, "Divine Love ... bids us to seek justice, because the compassion that mercy cultivates in our hearts requires us to make the world a better place, to heal wounds and fix oppressive realities."

After decades of harm from her mother, Serene had no capacity even for mercy toward her, but she finally realized there needed to be some form of justice to allow mercy to flow. When her mother died, her dad and her two younger sisters asked Serene, as the oldest of Sarah's children, to give the eulogy. She did, but she kept it to the kinds of good things one typically says in public when someone is laid to rest.

Days later, it came to her that she needed to write a second, private eulogy. She initially shared it only with her dad and sisters, all of whom had experienced Sarah in the crueler aspects of her behavior. In this private piece, Serene poured out a more honest record and evaluation of her mother's life, and sought to understand it. That eulogy isn't private any longer, because Serene included it in her book, where it helps us view her mother in a more balanced way. But for Serene, it served as the justice element that made not forgiveness, but mercy toward her mother, possible.

And that mercy was healing for Serene. She said that as she wrote the final words of that second eulogy, "for the first time in my life with [my mother], I felt the grip of my own anger start to lessen its hold on me and my aspirations for a theological life. I felt mercy. ..."

She said she began writing the eulogy thinking she was going to condemn her mother, but ended up feeling mercy for her, for herself and even for this planet and its people.

Mercy does not mean "blessing" the offender or the offending behavior. It does not necessarily mean reconciliation, and it may not mean a desire to continue the relationship with the offender. But we should not be surprised that Serene experienced a release from anger toward her mother as she embraced mercy. Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus, quoting Hosea 6:6, told some of his critics, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners" (9:13). Throughout the Bible,

God is repeatedly portrayed as extending mercy to sinners by withholding punishment for their sins. That's what the King James Bible means when it describes God as "longsuffering." Thus, when we are merciful, we come near to that divine virtue.

In the parable, Jesus used words for both forgiveness and mercy to help us comprehend his point, and in so doing, he gave us room to realize that mercy on our part, coupled with justice in some form that works for us, can be the element that brings us healing when we simply cannot forgive.

As the prophet Micah told us, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (6:8, NIV). Alleluia, Amen.