

That video was crazy uncomfortable, wasn't it? That's why I love talking about these monsters. Because we can use them to get at some really uncomfortable stuff. Our first two monsters were reflections of evils in our own souls. Vampires reflect our tendency to be selfish, to take instead of give. And werewolves are our inability to overcome our sin and selfishness on our own power. Both speak to our need for the Holy Spirit to be at work in our lives.



Today's about Ghost stories. Though they appear in many forms, the quintessential ghost story involves the spirit of a dead person who's stayed around (usually a haunted house) because they have unfinished business. Maybe they have to deliver a message or ensure proper burial or get revenge. Whatever the case, once their business is complete, they leave into the afterlife.

Unlike our previous two monsters, today we're not ghosts. Rather, to quote Peter Rollins, we are the haunted houses. We move through life collecting hurts, wounds and scars, evidence of pain inflicted on us by other people. Some may be slight, exaggerated in our heads - maybe someone who cuts us off or says something cruel or who causes us harm by accident. Others could be huge, life-altering. A spouse who left. An abuser. And there's a whole range of hurts between.

Whatever their source, however legitimate or not, these people don't just exit our lives. We carry them around with us, in our heads and in our souls. They haunt us, returning again and again out of the ether to drag us through the past, to relive history, to reopen old wounds.

The problem is we don't know what these ghosts want. We don't know how to resolve their business and get them to leave us. We can't escape their haunting - especially if the person who hurt you is still a part of your life.

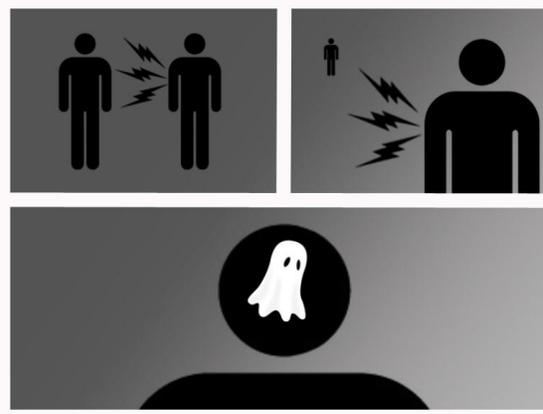
If we want to escape our ghosts, if we want to be free from the haunting of our hurts, we must learn the difficult art of forgiveness. And the process of forgiveness is every bit as uncomfortable and challenging as that skit. But the journey is worth it because the truth is our Unforgiveness gives these ghosts their power. Our minds, our souls, our lives belong to us, not to our ghosts, and if we submit ourselves to the Way of Jesus, we can find the freedom from these ghosts. But it's a freedom that lies on the other side of Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a tricky subject. We have lots of reasons - some better than others - not to forgive. Maybe we've been hurt so deeply we can't imagine letting go. Maybe we don't feel safe in forgiving - especially if that person is still in my life, won't that open me up to being hurt again? Something I've heard on more than one occasion: I'm willing to forgive them. They just have to ask for it. Or maybe that person's gone - they moved or died and now you don't see the point.

All our assumptions about forgiveness miss an important, fundamental: Forgiveness is not contingent on exterior factors. Forgiveness is first and foremost an *interior* journey. I quote Rob Bell on this all the time: "Unforgiveness is renting someone space in your head for free." In other

words, the ghosts in our heads, the spirits that haunt our souls, are there because we allow them to be. We are the final arbiters of our interior lives.

In a way, then, we're dealing with actual ghosts. The persons who live in our heads aren't the real person. They're shadows of the real person. Figments, imagined forms that resemble the person who hurt us, but who've taken on a life of their own.



We think it's that other person who constantly subjects us to those memories over and over. We think it's that other person who's moved in and taken over our lives. But it's not actually them. It's our version of them. A ghost. And the ghosts only have what power we give them.

Power is what's at the root of our unforgiveness. When someone wrongs us, they take away our power. They put us in a position where we can't control our reality (if we could, we wouldn't be hurt). Withholding forgiveness makes us feel strong. We can choose not to let that person go. We can revisit that situation over and over, imagining how we'd have done things differently, how we'd have taken control of the situation. How we would reshape the world to our wills, rather than allow ourselves to be shaped by the other person's choices.

When we make forgiveness about the other person, when forgiveness is something that depends on them and on their actions, we feel powerful. Because the other person did something that exerts power over us, we can use forgiveness as a weapon to flip the tables, to feel powerful, in control. We are either granting or withholding, like a king or queen.

But according to the Scriptures, forgiveness shouldn't be a weapon. In fact, our choice to forgive or not doesn't say anything about the other person. It says everything about the state of our own souls.

In Matthew 18, we get to listen in as Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. He must be wrestling with some ghosts of his own, because in v 21, he asks the question we've been considering today: "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" -- Matthew 18:21 (NLT)

Several rabbis agreed that the most you should extend forgiveness to someone was three times (baseball scholars agree this is the origin of the "Three Strikes and you're out" rule). So Peter must think himself pretty generous. But Jesus responds, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:22 (NLT)

And lest we think Jesus is saying we should literally keep track until we've forgiven someone 490 times, then cut them off, he illustrates what he means with a story about a slave:

"The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him [\$16 trillion]. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold-- along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned-- to pay the debt. But the man fell down before

his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. (vv23-27)

But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him [\$10,000]. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. "Be patient with me, and I will pay it," he pleaded. – (vv. 28-29)

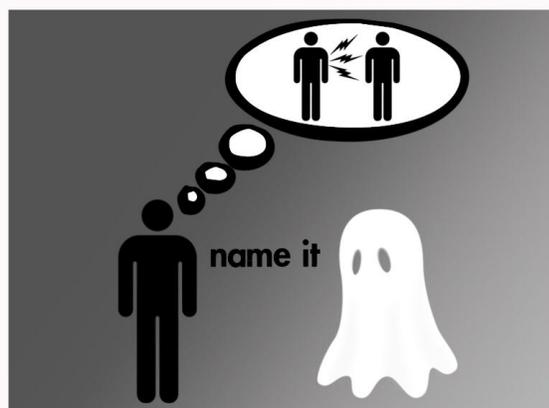
But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. (v30)

"When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'

Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart. -- Matthew 18:23-35 (NLT)

A couple of observations about the story. First, the amount the slave was owed by his coworker wasn't an insubstantial amount - who among us if someone actually owed us \$10,000 could simply shrug our shoulders and say, "Nah, forget about it. I don't need it."?



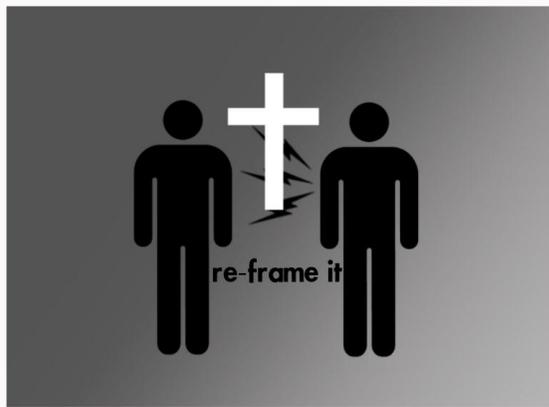
In the same way, Jesus' intention with this story is *not* to marginalize our hurts. In choosing to forgive, we cannot simply say, What happened to me doesn't matter. (Now, maybe if you're just ticked that someone cut in front of you in line at Kroger, it doesn't actually matter.) But for real pains, actual hurts, those *do* matter. And it's not healthy to "forgive and forget", especially if that person is still a part of your life. And Jesus does not tell you to ignore that, to trivialize it. Your pain is real. What happened to you matters, and you should not keep silent about it.

In fact, the first step to true forgiveness is honestly, truthfully naming our hurts. We err on one of two sides. If you're like me, you overplay your hurts. When you retell the story (or relive it in your head), you exaggerate the injustice. We make mountains out of molehills.

The other side of this is that you underplay. You assume you deserved it or it's no big deal. You make molehills out of mountains.

Both of these are wrong. To over-respond is prideful, and it denies the image of God in the other person, assumes I am more valuable than Them. To under-respond is shameful, and it denies the image of God in you. Under-responding assumes They are more valuable than I. This is why truth-telling matters.

Second, the amount the slave *owed* is a ridiculous amount. It's not a realistic number. In the Scriptures, it's more money than was probably in circulation in the Egyptian empire at the time. In our skit, it was more than the national debt. No one person could actually, realistically accrue that much debt. No credit card company will give you a credit card with a \$16 trillion limit.



Our "debt" to God is similarly impossible. The separation sin creates between us and God is insurmountable. Even to consider it is foolish.

Which makes the king's actions even more foolish. No king in his right mind would simply forgive such a huge debt. Yet that's exactly what happens, and what God does for us in Jesus' death and resurrection. When we were hopelessly lost, outrageously, ridiculously, impossibly, hilariously in debt, God forgave us.

Just like that. For no good reason.

Not because we came begging for it. Certainly not because we deserved it. Not because of how clever or strong or productive or cute or handsome or successful we are.

Just because God chose to.

Peter's question, our question "How much should I forgive?" puts us in the first slaves shoes. Someone has really and truly wronged us. We've named it truthfully. So how much should we forgive them?

Jesus says the second step in forgiveness is a **reframing**. He turns the question on its head and instead asks us, How are we going to respond to God's forgiveness? Will we step into it? Or ignore it? [Wrong question. In light of God's forgiveness, how will you respond to someone who's wronged you?]

In the story, the slave ignores it. He goes to his coworker, this person who owes him a real, significant amount of money. But in comparison, it's nothing. Literally. It's measured in the trillionths of a percent. So to this person who owes him the tiniest fraction of what he'd been forgiven, he does not show even the tiniest fraction of grace.

When the king finds out, he's furious. He has the slave thrown in prison until he can pay his debt. At current prison wages, that'd take about 4 billion years. (I had to do a lot of math for this sermon).

Jesus concludes his story by saying, "*That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.*" -- Matthew 18:35 (NLT)

When we choose not to forgive, we think we're powerful. We think we're running the show now, calling the shots. Like that slave, who demanded his money, we feel control. That's what that first slave thought too. But be honest about how you reacted to his decision. It's ugly.

Jesus wants us to understand what's at stake when we choose not to forgive. He warns us that unforgiveness is deadly. His story teaches us that when we choose not to forgive, we're missing God altogether. According to the story, if you're not extending forgiveness, then you're not actually participating in God's kingdom. You're not actually wrapping your head and your heart around what God has done for you through Jesus.

The scary truth is that when we choose Unforgiveness, we're not actually powerful. We're still allowing that other person to define our reality. To dictate the kind of person we'll be.

Rather than participating in God's kingdom, rather than refusing to let that other person's actions define us, we join in their power game. We try to be like *them*, try to have the upper hand, rather than refusing to play the game altogether.

As long as we let that ghost haunt us, as long as we continue to let that person live in our head, we will be outside the kingdom of God. Because when we choose not to forgive, we're essentially saying that other person is less human than us. They deserve forgiveness less than we do. They are less worthy of God's love.

But that attitude makes you just like the slave in the story. To withhold forgiveness is to be a person who doesn't recognize what God has done for you. It's refuse to become the kind of person God calls you to be.

Time for a gut-check: Do you want your life to be defined by God, or by the person who hurt you?

That's what the Lord's Prayer is getting at. In Matthew 6, when Jesus offers us a template for prayer, he says, "Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us... If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins." -- Matthew 6:12-15 (NLT)

That last part strikes us as harsh. If we withhold forgiveness, will God truly withhold forgiveness from us?

A better translation of the first line helps make sense of this:

Forgive us our sins the same way we forgive those who sin against us.

God, when you forgive us, do it the same way we extend forgiveness.

See, if you're not forgiving, that's a horrifying prayer to pray. God, treat my debt the way I treat the debts of the people who owe me. If you're still haunted by the ghosts of those who've hurt you, you won't want to pray that prayer.

But if you're choosing to live in God's forgiveness, if you're choosing to embrace God as your king, to accept the irrational, extravagant, hilarious, overwhelming forgiveness God offers, if *that's* how you're choosing to live your life, then you can pray this prayer.

That's what happens when you reframe your situation, when you really understand how much God loves you. You see the people who've hurt you as just that: people. Just like you. Imperfect people

who hurt because they've been hurt. Broken people who need the same kind of healing and rescue you've found in God.

That's not the same thing as condoning what They did. Not even a little bit. It is a choice not to let their actions continue to define you. A choice not to continue to live your life in the shadow of their decisions. A choice to step into the economy of grace that God calls us to and trust that a life defined by God, not our anger and hurt, is the better life, the better Way.

If we can humanize those ghosts living our heads, then we can extend the same welcome and forgiveness we've found in God to those people. Whether they deserve it or not (because we don't deserve it either). Whether they've asked for it or not (because God forgave us before we asked for it).

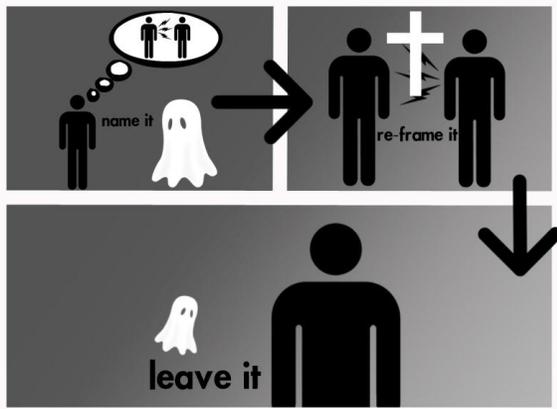


You can choose to forgive because your actions, your life, are not ruled by what the other person has done to you. Your life is ruled by the power of Christ, and the power of Christ compels you to forgive.

When you live with those ghosts, you become like that broken down, dilapidated haunted house. The longer those ghosts are in your life, the longer the slow poison of unforgiveness rots you from the inside out.

The Greek word the Scriptures use for "forgive" actually means to leave. It's the same word that describes what the disciples did when they followed Jesus - they *left* their nets. They *left* their boats. It means you walk away from it. You don't come back.

You abandon that thing that you were carrying with you, that thing that defined you. You drop it and you walk away. Because you have a new identity now. Those ghosts can't haunt you anymore. You refuse to let them continue to define who you are, dictate how you respond to the world.



Instead, you live in God's kingdom. You extend grace, mercy and forgiveness not because they ask for it. Not because they deserve it. But because you have been forgiven. Your debt has been paid. And the freedom you've found in the power of Christ compels you to pass it on.

The path to forgiveness isn't easy. And "leaving it" doesn't happen once. It takes time, it takes the choice to let go over and over. But if we consistently chase after God, if we choose to rest in God's forgiveness over and over and over, we will lay our ghosts to rest and find the peace we're seeking.

Communion SetUp

We're closing today, appropriately, with Communion. A song called "Lover's Eyes" is going to serve as the backdrop for our shared meal. I love this song because it's a lot like that video we saw earlier. It presents the journey of forgiveness as a long, messy process that hurts. But laced in the lyrics are the hope that it really does get better. That forgiveness really is worth it. That these ghosts won't haunt us forever.

You don't have to be a member of Beaver Creek Nazarene to share in this symbolic meal. All we ask is that you come today if you are tired of living with your ghosts and want to find freedom in the forgiveness Jesus offers.

So before you come today, I'd ask you to examine yourself. What ghosts are you carrying with you? Who is haunting you that you need to leave behind you?

God has already forgiven you a debt far larger than whatever hurts you're carrying with you. When you take the cracker that's been broken, you're taking Jesus' body, which was broken for that debt. And when you dip it in the grape juice, you're partaking of Jesus' blood, which was poured out to make peace between you and God.

This meal is God's way of saying that you're forgiven. So it's in this meal that we find the strength to leave our ghosts behind. Let today be the first day you choose to leave them behind. Let today be the first choice of many that will follow. Let today be the day you find God's strength, and God's healing.

Let's pray together:
[Prayer]

Come, share in Jesus' meal, and leave your ghosts at the table. Walk away in freedom.

