When my oldest daughter, Madeleine, was a baby, there was almost nothing my father wouldn’t do for her. When she was six weeks old, my parents came from Canada to meet their first grandchild for the first time. One afternoon Madeleine fell asleep on Grandpa Skip and he sat still for nearly three hours, refusing to move until she woke up. When she was 11 months old, I took her up to Alberta to visit my parents, and Grandpa Skip would give her countless piggy back rides and tell her one silly story after the other. He didn’t bat an eye as Madeleine took every item off the coffee table and put them on the floor. One evening, when we were eating dinner, Madeleine discovered that if she dropped something from her high chair Grandpa Skip would bend down and pick it up and give it back to her. Oh, what fun. You could see the little wheels going around in her head as she dropped her toy over and over and Grandpa picked it up and handed it to her. Finally, my dad said, “OK, Madeleine. You can have four more drops. But that’s it.”

Everybody—even soft-hearted grandpas—has their limits. Limits are a part of life—we need limits on how fast we can drive, how much money we can borrow, and how long we can go without mowing our lawn before our neighbors get annoyed. Limits help us get along with each other.

When Peter asks Jesus about forgiving a church member who has hurt him, we don’t know exactly what he has in mind. Perhaps he’s picturing someone who cheats him in his fishing business; or someone who gets a little too friendly with his wife while Peter is off on a mission trip with Jesus and his fellow disciples. Maybe he imagines the friend who owes him
money yet has the nerve to come to church riding a brand-new state of the art donkey. Maybe he pictures James and John taking credit for one of HIS great ideas—or posting something snarky about him on Facebook—or, God forbid, sitting in his pew. Whatever it is, Peter thinks, surely there’s a limit. And wouldn’t a limit of seven be unbelievably generous? If someone hurts your child or your grandchild, it can take all we’ve got to forgive the offender ONE time, let alone seven. (The way Peter phrases it, it’s almost as if he expects Jesus to say, “Oh, no, Peter—three times is plenty. If it’s really bad, once is enough. But good on you for offering to forgive seven times.”)

Instead Jesus says, “Don’t you get it? Let me tell you a story . . .” A slave owes his king an unbelievable amount of money. A single talent was worth more than fifteen years’ worth of typical daily wages—it would be hard for Caesar himself to come up with 10,000 talents, much less a servant. As one scholar points out, it’s harder to know who is more foolish in this story—the servant, for getting into that much debt, or the king, for allowing a line of credit like that.

And though he is forgiven the whole ridiculous amount, this servant runs into a fellow slave who owes him just one hundred denarii—or in other words, over half a million times less than the first debt. In this situation, it’s actually possible that the second slave can repay this small amount to the first slave. But the forgiven one shows no mercy. His fellow slaves are horrified by his behavior and tell the king what has happened. And now the first slave will be tortured until he pays the whole debt. Jesus says, “That’s what will happen to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

We know it’s important to forgive. We’ve read the studies about how resentment eats away at our health and our heart and our relationships. It tortures us, just like the unforgiving servant is tortured in the parable. Churches are not immune to this. At my previous church, I
discovered a couple of years ago that a certain member would call the church every week and ask who was preaching that Sunday. If it was me, she and her husband would not come to church that week. Apparently, some years back, I had not said hello to her husband and he was offended. When I heard why they weren’t there, I did feel a little bit bad—I never meant to be rude to this couple, who were longtime members. I had no memory of deliberately never saying hello to them.

But here’s the thing: until somebody pointed it out to me, I never noticed that they weren’t there when I was preaching. I mean, I truly had no clue. I just thought they were one of many families who come two or three times a month. All those years, this couple was missing out at least once a month on visiting with longtime friends, hearing and singing beautiful music, and the joy of worshiping God in their beloved church home. I do want to reassure you that the story has a happy ending—after some intentional outreach this past year, I saw this couple in worship a number of times when it was my turn to preach. The point is, and you already know this—when we don’t forgive, WE suffer FAR more than the one we don’t forgive.

A big news story in 2006 was the forgiveness shown by an Amish community when a man went to a one-room schoolhouse and shot ten little girls, killing five of them. The killer’s mother, Terri Robert’s, remembers thinking she would have to move away. But the Amish came to her home that very night—notice how THEY made the first move—and said, “We want you to stay.” And several families who had buried their daughters the day before came to her son’s funeral and hugged her. Terri later shared, “There are not words to describe how that made us feel—that parents who had lost not one but two daughters at the hands of our son were the first to greet us. Is there anything in this life we should not forgive?” Now, once a week, Terri takes care of the Amish girl who was the most severely wounded that day.
It wasn’t that the Amish got over the tragedy quickly—not at all. They didn’t forgive because it was easy, or because the killer’s family deserved it. They forgave because it was who they are, and what they believe.

A huge chunk of Jesus’ teaching is about forgiveness, directly or indirectly. Think about the parable of the prodigal son, turning the other cheek, and letting the one who is without sin throw the first stone. If we claim to be followers of Christ, then what we are saying about ourselves is that we are a people who forgive not on a case-by-case basis, but as a way of life. It doesn’t mean that we have to let people walk all over us—if a woman is abused by her partner, forgiveness doesn’t mean sticking around for more abuse. It means letting go of the desire to hit back and get even. It means acknowledging our anger and expressing it in healthy ways so we can let it go. It means trusting that our lives really are in God’s hands, and trusting God to BE God—the God who provides and protects and works for justice on our behalf.

When the unforgiving servant sees the slave who owes HIM a little bit of money, he isn’t thinking about the astronomically huge gift of freedom he has just received. Already he has forgotten how gracious his lord has been to him. If he remembered, there’s no way he’d be able to treat another person like that. It’s kind of like the kid who unwraps a whole pile of amazing and expensive toys on their birthday—you think they’ll be thrilled and grateful but by lunchtime they’re already starting to work on their Christmas list and it’s as if you never gave them anything in the first place.

Maybe we haven’t personally done anything really horrific—we haven’t broken any major laws or left our spouse or neglected our kids—maybe we’re overall pretty decent folks who try really hard to be kind and to do our best in life. If that’s how we see ourselves, it can be hard to relate to the unforgiving servant in this story. No matter who we are, though, can we not
see how abundantly blessed and gifted we are by the God who created and loves us? And when we realize how deeply loved and blessed we are, can we not trust God with all the hurts and wrongs we have suffered? Can we not trust that God will bring something good out of even the ugliest, darkest moments, even if we have no idea what that will look like and no idea if it is something we get to see in our lifetime?

The renowned Catholic teacher Richard Rohr says that forgiveness is not about specifics—it’s an attitude of forgiving reality for being what it is. There’s a fly in the ointment of reality, but it’s in the struggle that we grow, he says. Sometimes I think that we hold on to anger because as awful as it is, THAT feels safer than admitting how vulnerable each of us is to the hard, unfair things that inevitably happen to us as part of the human experience. There’s a sense of control when we stay mad.

But if we can keep our eyes on the lord, whose giving truly knows no end, if we can really accept that God has the whole world in God’s hands and we are a small but precious part of that, we will know a freedom like nothing else. We can forgive our ex-husbands and ex-wives for whatever wrong they did to us, and move on into the new life God has for us, because there always is one. Always. We can stop making snide remarks about that one person—you know the one—because we will KNOW we are so loved, so beautiful, so wonderful in God’s sight that we don’t need to put others down in order to feel good about ourselves. We can stop resenting the parent who was critical of us, the boss who betrayed us, and the friend who forgot us—not because what they did is OK, but because with God, we are more than OK. Best of all, we can even forgive ourselves. Isn’t THAT good news.

On this weekend when we remember and give thanks for the unparalleled freedom that we enjoy in the United States of America, may we also remember and give thanks for the
unparalleled freedom that we have in Jesus Christ. May we know the joy of life lived with an attitude of forgiveness, forgiving as freely as God has forgiven us. Amen.