

September 17, 2017: Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 18:21-35: Forgiveness

At the very beginning of last week's sermon I told you it was going to be a long one. I was right. In fact, I almost broke a personal record. Thirty minutes! The longest sermon I ever preached was thirty-five minutes. It was the very first I preached in an actual church setting. Before that I had preached in a half-way house, a prison, and a nursing home. I didn't keep track of the time then. For reasons you can probably guess, they either didn't care how long the sermon was, or if they did, they couldn't do anything about it.

If you recall, the topic last week was not the kind of thing you would want to rush through. We looked at the difficult and sensitive issue of how to respond when a member of the church sins against is or another member of our church family? And we learned that Jesus has a fairly straightforward answer, a procedure we are supposed to follow.

The first step is to go to the individual who has sinned and let them know what you are thinking. The hope is that they will acknowledge their sin, ask for forgiveness, and the relationship can be restored. But if that doesn't work, the next step is to involve two or three more individuals with a reputation for being fair, honest, and Christ-like. Let them know about the situation and invite them to come along for a second conversation. If the offender still refuses to repent and ask for forgiveness, the final step is to bring the matter before the church. If the offender persists in the refusal to repent and ask for forgiveness, the church is to ask them to leave until they do so.

It's hard to imagine having to do anything more difficult than that. Or is it? I think there are times we might actually prefer having to kick someone out of the church over the alternative, forgiveness. What if the procedure works? What if a person does repent, say they are sorry, and ask for forgiveness? Depending on the nature of the offense, forgiveness can be really hard. Kicking someone out of the church almost seems easier.

Thankfully, we can always count on Peter to ask the questions the other disciples, and we, are afraid to; and that is, if the person who sins against us does ask for forgiveness, how many times are we supposed to extend it? How many times should we forgive the same person, for doing the same thing, to us? Before Jesus could answer that question, Peter asked another, "Is seven times enough?"

The typical answer most rabbis in Peter's day would have given to the question of how many times a person should forgive another for the same offense was three times. Peter thought he was really going all out when he suggested seven. It was more than double what all the other spiritual leaders were saying. And the number seven represented "completeness" in Jewish thought. It seemed like the perfect number. He was probably expecting Jesus to commend him for his generosity. You can imagine how he felt when Jesus said, "No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times," or some translations say, "seventy times seven."

The obvious point Jesus was making was that Peter wasn't even close, and that, in fact, there was no limit to the number of times one person should forgive another. But there could be even more to it than that. There is a strong possibility that Jesus was alluding to a passage in Genesis 4:24, where Lamech, a descendant of Cain said, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech, seventy-seven fold."

You may remember, Cain was the son of Adam and Eve who murdered his brother Abel. Cain was worried that someone would want to take revenge, so God made a promise to him that if anyone

murdered him their punishment would be seven times as bad. We move forward a few generations to Lamech, a descendant of Cain's. Like his ancestor, he murdered someone, but showed very little fear that he would have to face any consequences. He believed that if someone did something to him, their punishment would be seventy-seven times as bad.

Really, his statement revealed about how corrupt the idea of justice had become in only a few generations. What he was describing wasn't justice at all, but revenge. It would be like saying, if someone stole \$1 from you, to make it right, you can take \$77 from them. Later, the concept of eye for an eye would be introduced as a way of limiting excessive retribution.

Jesus was trying to show how revolutionary this idea of forgiveness really was. Revenge is what we are naturally inclined to do when someone wrongs us. When someone sins against us they take something from us, and so we want to take something from them. Maybe they took something tangible from us, or something intangible, like our pride, our sense of security, a relationship that we valued. Whatever it is, they owe us. So we want to get even. If we are honest, we want to get more than even. We want them to really pay for what they have done.

Most people in our society see nothing wrong with this kind of thinking. As far as most people are concerned, responding to people who have wronged you by doing the very same thing to them, or even worse, is perfectly acceptable. But Jesus wants us to respond in a completely different way entirely. He has taken this extreme example of retribution or getting even, repaying someone seventy-seven times, and said that his followers are to be every bit as extreme in practicing forgiveness. He then tells a parable to explain his answer.

It's a story about a king who wanted to settle up with everyone who owed him money. One of his servants, who owed him ten thousand talents, was brought before him. This was an astronomical amount of money. One talent was equal to 15 years' worth of wages for a typical laborer. I tried to do the math. I figured \$15 / hour. So \$15, times 40 hours, times 52 weeks, times 15 years, equals \$468,000. Multiply that by 10,000, and you end up with \$4.68 billion. This doesn't account for differences in currency value, inflation, etc. Basically it such a large amount of money we would refer to as a bazillion dollars, because it is just completely beyond our comprehension.

There is no way this man could ever pay him back, but the king had plans to get the most he could out of him any way, by selling him, and his family into slavery, and selling all his possessions. The slave begged for mercy and promised to repay the debt. He knew it was not possible, but he offered anyway. The king knew it was not possible, so he forgave the debt completely.

The slave rose to his feet, this tremendous burden lifted, walked outside, and ran into another slave who owed him a hundred denarii. A denarius is equal to a daily wage for a common laborer. So using the same numbers I used earlier, that amounts to \$12,000. Again, it's not a direct equivalent, but it does represent an amount of money that could be repaid in a reasonable amount of time. Like the first servant, the second servant pleads for mercy, and promises to repay the debt. But instead of forgiving the debt as the king had just done for him, or even just giving him a chance to repay the debt, the first servant has the second servant thrown in debtor's prison.

When word of this got back to the king, he called the first servant in once more, and reversed his decision to forgive him, sentencing him to a lifetime of torture. Jesus concluded the parable with the warning that anyone who refused to forgive their brother or sister who sinned against them could expect to receive the same treatment from God.

So apparently forgiveness is pretty important. That is certainly one message we could take away from this. God wants us, even expects us, to forgive the people who have sinned against us. And not just one time, but every time. Over, and over, again. But as we said at the beginning, forgiveness can be really hard. In this parable we have some motivation.

We should be motivated, inspired, encouraged, obligated (whatever word you want to use) to forgive others of their sin, because God has forgiven us of our sin. And there really is no comparison between the debt others owe to us, and the debt we owe to God. Regardless of what someone else has done to us. While it is possible in most cases for a person to repay whatever they owe us for the sins committed against us, we have no hope of ever making things right between us and God. Without his mercy, without his grace, without his forgiveness, we have no choice but to face the consequences.

There are so many reminders throughout the Scriptures of how amazing God's forgiveness truly is. A perfect example can be found in Psalm 103, which was the inspiration for our call to worship this morning.

⁸*"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹*He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.*

¹⁰*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

¹²*as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*

Or these words from the first chapter of Ephesians,

⁷*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us.*

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. The Bible is full of references to the forgiveness that is ours because of God's love for us. This knowledge of God's love for us, and our experience of God's forgiveness, should be all the motivation we need to forgive others. But is it? Is there anyone you struggle to forgive? Is there any debt owed to you that you have not cancelled?

Another motive this parable suggests to us is fear. It is, after all, a story about a king who hands down a sentence of a lifetime of torture for this servant who fails to forgive. We naturally come to the conclusion that if we don't forgive someone then God will not forgive us. And that is true. Jesus says that exact thing earlier in Matthew's Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount. But is it really that straightforward? Will our failure to forgive someone lead to even more than a lifetime, but an eternity, of torture?

There are a lot of problems with seeing the king in the parable as an exact representation of God. Does the sentence of torture handed down by the king seem consistent with a God, who, only moments before, told his disciples that forgiveness should have no limits? Or we can look earlier, to the part where the king's first thought was to sell the indebted servant into slavery, along with his entire family. Does that look anything like the God who sent his Son to die on a cross for sinners like you and me? Of course not.

The king is not an exact representation of God. It is a parable. In parables one character is meant to represent another. Clearly, the king is meant to represent God on some level, but we have to be careful

not to take the comparison too far. If you struggle to make sense of everything Jesus was trying to say here, and how to reconcile this with the larger picture of God you see in the Scriptures, you are not alone.

For me, one more way we can see this parable is as Jesus' acknowledgment of something we have already said many times this morning, which is that forgiveness is complicated, forgiveness is messy, forgiveness is not easy. Sometimes, forgiveness seems all but impossible. Remember, we are talking about the big things now. There may be people who have really hurt you. People who have done terrible things to you. And the thought of forgiving that person for what they have done seems like the hardest thing in the world to you.

I wonder if forgiveness isn't hard for God too. Not for the same reasons as us. Just think about what God's people have put him through. At first they didn't really know what all he expected of them. Then he gave them the Ten Commandments, but things didn't really change. What followed was hundreds of years of failure, after failure, after failure. Not all of them, but some of them, played a role in his death. I have to believe that, in his humanness, Jesus struggled to forgive those individuals who were responsible for his crucifixion. At the end of the day as he hung there on the cross, struggling for each breath, he cried out, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Last week I shared a little of my story with you, about a group of individuals, and one person in particular, who did some pretty awful things to me. It's been nearly six years now. I don't think about it every day. Not even every month. But these last few weeks I have thought about it a lot. These words from Jesus about forgiveness have compelled me to consider whether or not I have completely forgiven them.

I really believed that I had. I don't have any ill will toward them. I don't wish any thing bad upon them. Believe me, that is real progress. But I got to thinking, is it possible to forgive someone who has never asked for it? None of those individuals ever have. They have never acknowledged any wrongdoing. They have never said, "I'm sorry." At least not to me. So I've wondered, what does forgiveness look like in this situation. Because I want to do what is required of me as a follower of Jesus.

I think it means being able to say, if they were to ask for my forgiveness, I would give it. In the meantime, I know that God expects me to love them, because he expects me to love everyone, even my enemies. I actually reached out to the ringleader of this group this week. I haven't heard back. I'm really not sure why I reached out. I think maybe to give them an opportunity to apologize. But I imagined what I would say, or how I would feel, if she continued to persist in her belief that she was innocent. And I felt the slightest bit of pain from the wound that still remains. I had to ask for God's help me not feel toward her the way I was feeling.

As I was saying, forgiveness is hard. A friend of mine compared forgiveness to a journey. We could also say "process." That makes a lot of sense. The idea of forgiving someone an unlimited amount of times for doing the very same thing over and over and over, could also be thought of as forgiving someone over and over and over, for just doing one thing. It is what Jesus asks of us. It's what he expects of us. By the power of his Holy Spirit within us, he can help us. If we fail to forgive, he will forgive us, as long as we keep trying. Over, and over, and over again.