

15th Sunday After Pentecost September 13, 2020 Outdoor Worship

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35

A couple of things to keep in mind about this text before we dig into it.

When he asks his question, Peter probably has in mind the process that Jesus laid out in the passage just before this (that we heard last week). So, he's asking how many times do I go through this process of forgiveness with someone? As many as seven times? He probably thought he was being generous in that response.

Jesus' reply was astounding in its scope, "Not seven but seventy-seven (some texts say seventy times seven)" In other words- far more than you can imagine Peter and certainly far more than you can keep track of... which may be the point of the whole exercise. Forgiveness is not finite. Each time you do it, it's the first time.

While Peter is picking his jaw up off the ground, Jesus shares the parable. Here again we get an unbelievable contrast. A single talent is worth about 20 years of labor at the typical daily wage of the time. So, the slave owes 200,000 years of labor to his ruler. In today's dollars somewhere between 2 and 4 billion dollars. This is what he is forgiven.

The debt that is owed to him by the other slave is 100 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage. In today's dollars the debt would be roughly \$6,000. Not small, but certainly human- realistic in scale. The one forgiven an immense amount refuses to forgive a vastly smaller amount.

When word of this gets back to the ruler, he rescinds his forgiveness and throws the slave in jail and we are left with this passage, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

What do we do with this parable? What do we do with that last passage?

It certainly is a reflection of what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer every week- “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” and if you’re like me you add in a little mental, “Oh please God, forgive me better than I forgive!”

This kicker to our reading has some bite. Is forgiveness a quid pro quo? From my reading of scripture as a whole I don’t think so, but it does catch our attention- and I think that is the main thing this parable does- pull us up short and get us thinking about forgiveness. Both what we are forgiven of and what we forgive others.

The parable grounds forgiveness in the very nature of God who desires reconciliation, who is merciful. Who forgives us and shows mercy to us on a scale that is ridiculous when compared to what we think others owe us. As the Rev. Mark Davis put it- until we can accept that our debt that God has forgiven was really all that hefty to begin with; and that the debt we refuse to forgive someone else is really all that light, then we believe that this parable is for someone else and not for us.

This parable begs the question, what is forgiveness?

Author Lewis Smedes defines forgiveness as relinquishing my right to get even. Giving up my right to hurt you because you hurt me.

We have illustrations of this forgiveness at work in our world. Some of the families of the Emmanuel Nine, who were killed by Dylan Roof in their bible study at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC forgave Dylan Roof for his actions. Gave up their right to get even. In 2006 a gunman entered an Amish school in Lancaster County, PA and killed five girls and shot five others before turning the gun on himself. The overwhelming response of the families of those killed and wounded was forgiveness towards both the shooter and his family.

In that forgiveness they gave up their right to get even, to hurt because they had been hurt. It is an overwhelmingly human response, that desire to get even, to strike back at the one who has hurt you. It is a divine response to let go of that. And do we remember what Jesus said we were to put our minds on? Human or divine things?

Forgiveness is necessary for community, for living together, anyone in a family or marriage will tell you that. You need to let go of those things people do that hurt you , big and small, or our whole lives would be about getting even with people and we'd never trust one another. Never love someone. Never work together.

Forgiveness frees us. It frees us from being bound to revenge, bound to that hurt, bound by the need to get even.

Forgiveness is one side of a coin. The other is repentance. Forgiveness is to the one who is hurt as repentance is to the one who hurts. It is mostly when you have both of those present that you can fully have restoration of relationship.

True reconciliation. Each, however, can be present on their own. And each can have dramatic effects on the one who offers it.

I can forgive you, let go of my right to hurt you for hurting me, and you are never once repentant for inflicting that hurt. Forgiveness, though, is more about me than you. It is about my letting go, being freed from that viscerally human desire for revenge. Repentance is about the one who has hurt another recognizing that hurt and what it means and saying it out loud to the one whom they have hurt. It is, I'm sorry for what I have done. This can have benefit for the one offering it even if it is rejected.

Forgiveness, true forgiveness like God's which blots out our offense, makes the offense as if they never had existed, this kind of forgiveness is hard!

Let me be clear- forgiveness does not mean allowing others to keep abusing or hurting us. I have heard of women reading this text as saying they should stay in abusive relationships. No, no, no it does not!

The way I have always spoken of that is this- Both parties involved bear the image of God and for you to hurt me harms both of us and out of love for you and respect for that image of God, I won't let you do that. Also, forgiveness also does not mean there will not be consequences. For example, if the treasurer of the Synod were caught embezzling money would you forgive them, yes. Would you let them continue to be treasurer, no. Would they possibly suffer criminal and civil penalties, yes. Our actions have consequences- forgiveness only means that the personal ones I have inflicted on others will not come back to me.

What happens when we cannot forgive? Are we doomed? Damned?

It was 6 months ago last Monday that my stepson Erik was killed by a driver who crossed the center line. That man is charged with driving drunk. Those most affected by this, my wife, my daughter-in-law, my stepdaughter, are not in a place where they can forgive the man responsible. I know that Karen hears texts like this and worries. Wonders. It's hard to consider forgiving.

I think the fact that she worries, and wonders is good. It shows faith at work. Because the purpose of texts like these is to constantly keep us in that tension, to pull us out of our singular, human centered focus on revenge and always pull us to forgiveness. Ultimately, because that way lies freedom for ourselves!

If the scale of the difference really is what Jesus laid out for us, 200,000 years vs 1/3 of a year, imagine the pain God has experienced from us. And yet, God has forgiven us. Loved us. Pursued restoration of relationship with us. Relentlessly.

And God calls us to do the same because God knows what a gift forgiveness is to the one doing the forgiving. How much it frees us from.

And that is what Jesus came to do- set the captives free.

What hurts still fester in your life that need to be forgiven? Things that still bind you years later?

What unforgiven things still poison your relationships? A colleague told a story of a woman in a previous congregation who came from an abusive home and who blamed her mother for not intervening, not seeing that abuse and also for not saying she was sorry for it years later. It was only in the later years of her mother's life that this woman finally saw that her mother was incapable, for whatever reason, of doing those things. And it was only then that she could

forgive her mother, release the pain that had infected their relationship, and develop a rich and loving relationship with her in the last years of her mother's life.

I pray that we would all see with clear eyes how much God has forgiven and continues to forgive us. Things done and left un-done. Things said and left unsaid. Things thought and done in the darkness. Forgiven, because God loves us so much and desires to be in relationship with us. I pray, that if you don't think God can forgive those things you would hear clearly now the fact that God already has. It is as if they never happened.

I pray that you would see with clear eyes those places where the desire to hurt others as they hurt you has infected your life. I pray that the Holy Spirit would move in you to see that hurt in contrast with what God has forgiven, to see that hurt through 8th commandment eyes that look for the best construction of things, would see in the one who hurt you a fellow human being, struggling just like us to live as God would have us live.

I pray these things for you because in that forgiveness, you will find freedom. Because in that forgiveness you will experience again the grace and mercy of God to you. Because in that forgiveness lies life... fuller and more abundant.

And that life is what God desires you to have.