

Year A
13, 2020

15th after Pentecost

September

Exodus 14:19-31 Ps. 103:1-13
18:21-35

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Marshall Goldsmith who is a well-known Leadership coach describes a test he gives to all of his executive clients whom he describes as being addicted to winning. Here is an example that he challenges people with:

You want to go to dinner at restaurant X.

Your partner wants to go to restaurant Y.

There is an argument and you end up at restaurant Y — not your choice.

Do you:

- a) Be a grump, critique the experience, and explain that this terrible mistake that could have been avoided, or
- b) do you drop the “attitude” and try to enjoy yourself.

The whole point Jesus is making this morning is that forgiveness is not a quantifiable event – not part of winning a contest of wills, regardless of who you are or your status or how important your opinion. It is a quality, a standard, if you will, for how we relate to others that is meant to be an innate way for how we see the world and those we share it with. If we are to follow Christ then it must become our way as well. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times seven, which is simply a way of saying “always.”.

Does that forgiveness apply to the drunk driver, the bully, those who cheat, racists, abusers, greedy corporations? Yes, yes and yes.

So we squirm. Really? Isn't that impossible and why would we want to be that forgiving, anyway, even if only theoretically?

We want to say that Jesus could not possibly image how evil the world has become; how we have outdone ourselves in cruelty and weaponry and the need for power over others. It is hard to miss the irony of observing the pre-election furor in the United States and then in the same news hour seeing the destructive force of 2 hurricanes heading for the coastal states of that same country. No one is untouchable, political enemy or good neighbour, it seems. Ironically, the images and the emotions that evoke anger, fear, pain and loss all intersect with Jesus' teaching about forgiveness. Those feelings are real beyond the events of the past few weeks or the months of Covid-19. They are true throughout modern

history and right back into Jesus' time. The Holocaust, genocide, economic oppression, wars, slavery of yesterday and, sadly, of today.

Look at our own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories lies the question of forgiveness. Really, Jesus? Forgive?

C.S. Lewis suggests that everyone is in favour of forgiveness in principle. "Every one," he writes in *Mere Christianity* "says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive" (*Mere Christianity*, p.115). What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive?

We have a lot of options and, sitting down together, we could make a list out from our own experience: seeking revenge maybe; or running away from life; or shutting down relationships; or accepting an apology among them.

Every one of us knows how hard it can be to forgive. Like you, I too struggle with it sometimes and work at avoiding it. It is easier "to leave something alone" or to pretend "it doesn't matter" But any of those behaviours leave us stuck in the past with no resolution to the hurt except to bury it deep. Bad idea and we do really know it instinctively, whether we are the person hurt or the one inflicting pain. Either way, our whole connection with someone else is rooted in what is evil in them. That is not the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness does not mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from those very same things in ourselves. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, to make ourselves the ultimate judge holding others accountable, as Paul points out in Romans, "*For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.*"

Today's parable tells us that God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are intertwined. The king forgives his slave a massive debt. In Jesus' time, ten thousand talents is about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. Everyone there would understand Jesus to be saying that no debt is too large to be forgiven. Yet, this man's is. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That is the nature of God. By contrast, this same slave refuses to forgive his fellow slave an amount which was not even close to his own debt. 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too frequently, we forget our

indebtedness to others in a whole host of ways. In that refusal we, like the forgiven slave, become unworthy of our own forgiveness.

Every Sunday we acknowledge that weakness in ourselves both as community and as individuals within community. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The words are easy and they come easily. But do we live our prayer? Do our actions support our request? "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

That's a lot of forgiveness but, in truth, the world, our nation, and all of us are in need of it. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for our own sake as for the sake of the person we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is where we start to heal our own wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you but the promise is that our own lives will be more promise filled, more grace-filled, more whole, more God-like for having forgiven another.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. It is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life. Why? Because we are no longer tangled up in what is evil in someone else. Forgiveness means that our future will not be determined by the past. We have all trespassed in big and small ways. We have all forgiven trespassers; so your experience tells you what Jesus says is all too true from both perspectives. It is just really, really difficult. Remember that Jesus is speaking to Peter who betrayed his Lord 3 times and was forgiven 3 times.

How many times must we choose to forgive? You can answer that question for yourself. How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you avoided speaking about another person even after they died? How many times have you replayed in your head some argument with another? How many times did you have to feel you had to be the winner over someone else? That's how many opportunities you have to choose forgiveness.

So how do we begin to forgive? First, park the idea that you "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." That advice is simplistic and trite. It is also conditional because it denies the depth of the pain, especially when the one you can't forgive is yourself. Forgiving takes time and work. It requires self-awareness and practice every day. More to the point, forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It's about God. We do not choose to forgive. We only choose to share the forgiveness we have already received. Then we choose

again, and then again, and then yet again. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we learn to live into.

Mother Teresa sums this whole passage of scripture up in saying:

We need lots of love to forgive and we need lots of humility to forget, because it is not complete forgiveness unless we forget also. ... Very often we say we have forgiven but we cannot forget. And as long as we cannot forget, we really have not forgiven fully.”