

Pastor's Message – 9/13/20  
Matthew 18:21-35

A fellow went to the hospital to visit his partner who had been taken strangely ill and was near death. Suddenly, the dying man began to speak. "John," he said, "before I go, I have to confess some things and ask your forgiveness. I want you to know that I robbed the firm of \$100,000 several years ago. I sold our secret formula to our competition, and John, I am the one who supplied your wife with the evidence that got her the divorce and cost you a small fortune. Will you forgive me?"

John murmured, "That's okay, old man. I am the one who gave you the poison." Seventy times seven?

In a perverse and extreme way, the partner reflects modern attitudes toward forgiveness. We live in a balance-sheet world that demands justice. Society counsels, "Don't get mad; get even." When things do not go our way, we are advised to "Sue their socks off!" We live in a society which believes, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

But our Bible passage today suggests an alternative. This passage continues the discussion of forgiveness within the church from the section in chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel before our passage for today and expands it, with Peter asking how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. He even offers what to him appears to be a very generous answer. "As many as seven times seven" reflects more than double the answer given in the Jewish tradition, which was as many as three times.

Jesus' answer appears to offer a number, either "seventy times seven" or "seventy-seven" depending upon the translation, but that is misleading. While Peter is looking for a quantitative answer, Jesus is interested in providing a qualitative number. Not "How often?" but rather "Why?" is behind Jesus' reply.

The point of this parable, in contrast to Peter's request for a number, is to open one's eyes to the magnitude of the debt of sin forgiven us. With that realization, the bantering of the question of how often to forgive the relatively puny debt committed against us becomes ridiculous. It is a parable of the absurd.

In the cartoon strip, "Calvin & Hobbes," Calvin's mom asks him to take out the trash. He replies by asking, "Why? What's in it for me?" His mom

explains that she and his father will feed, clothe, house, and see to his other needs for 18 years. As Calvin is taking out the trash, he mutters to himself that he hates having things put in perspective. This parable puts the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we offer in perspective.

Peter wanted to be given permission to put reasonable limits on Christian forgiveness. Unfortunately for him, Jesus wouldn't let him off the hook. The parable today is not about repeated offences. It is about the magnitude of the thing forgiven. We are not to put limits on our forgiveness of others; the important thing is to remember how much God has forgiven us.

The key thing about forgiveness may be the sense of arriving at a new and better place in a relationship. That's part of the need we have. It may sound trite, but the "unforgiveness" or animosity we feel toward others is like a poison or an acid that eats away at the container. So, if we can't forgive for the generous purpose, we must forgive for our own sake. Otherwise it eats away at our insides.

A reflection on forgiveness today reminds me of the old song by Tony Orlando and Dawn. You may remember the song about the man who was in prison and finally released. He allows for the possibility that he might not be forgiven and suggests that if he is, they should tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree if he can possibly be forgiven, but if it is not there, he will stay on the bus. You may remember that when the bus passes by the old oak tree, there are a hundred yellow ribbons tied to the tree! That's God's forgiveness toward us **and** what He expects of us.

It is often argued that this parable is clearly an allegory: King = God; debtor = sinner; money = sin, etc. If we accept this explanation, however, when we come to the end of the story we are left to explain how it is that God's grace can be withdrawn or rescinded at any time if God doesn't approve of our behavior.

Better to let the parable be a parable, told to make a simple point which is made by Jesus and Matthew in more than a few instances: "Forgive one another as you have been forgiven." I think the passage is about the absurdity of God's forgiveness.

Jesus suggests that there should be no limit to Christian forgiveness. In relations between Christians, forgiveness should be the norm, not the exception. Forgiveness of others and forgiveness from God are woven together as part of a unique process of grace beyond imagining. We are

to forgive, always, and as many times as wrongdoing takes place. Moreover, through forgiving others, we will indeed experience forgiveness.

Unfortunately, our hearts can be hard, and if they are hard, not only can we not understand the word of God, but according to Jesus, we can't be healed until our hearts become soft enough to open up to the power of God's healing love and grace.

I think there is a clue here in trying to understand forgiveness of the heart. For true forgiveness and healing to happen, our hearts must be open; they must be soft; they must be willing to accept that maybe something in us needs to change, needs to turn, needs to allow Christ in so that God can work a miracle on our hearts.

God can change our hearts. And we can pray that our hearts might be softened; that God might come in and help us to see that which we cannot see on our own and do what we cannot do on our own.

Until we open ourselves up to the Lord, until we repent from our sins and let God soften our hearts, true forgiveness and healing simply cannot happen, and we can't move forward as a community of faith to offer ministry to others, because it can't make its way into the place that it needs to be: our hearts.

The call to forgiveness hounds us. We know we should. We know we are called, as Christians, to forgive. But it isn't always that easy. The "slings and arrows" of insult and injury which we may have endured at the hands of other crueler, meaner, less forgiving people stay with us and haunt our sleep and even our waking hours

Sometimes we think, "if only I had said ... If only I hadn't said ... If I had only done ... If I hadn't done what I did ..." But it doesn't really help to be beaten over the head with "would a', could a, should a." A lecture on why we should forgive others, even from ourselves, rarely moves us to forgiveness.

Better to remember that we have been forgiven. We have been, from time to time, given a taste of grace, and we know the sweetness that it can bring to our lives as both recipient and giver. And then remind us that forgiveness, hard as it is, is a gift given to us by God not to be hoarded but to be poured out and shared.

That people hurt each other grievously is not to be disputed; that hurts don't matter and don't cry out for redress is not even to be considered. As I suggested last week, to say simply, "It doesn't matter; it's all right," is to

cheapen or minimize what has happened. What was done matters and matters a lot.

What is important to remember is that forgiveness is not a matter of numbers or frequency of occurrence. It is a matter of acknowledging that each of us have received incalculable mercy, and not merely justifiable forgiveness of a debt we can eventually pay back, given enough time.

The lesson seems to be that without an overwhelming sense of indebtedness, forgiveness becomes a matter of keeping score. We are unlikely to give mercy unless we are aware of having received unimaginable mercy ourselves. If we believe we have been forgiven, how does that realization change our lives?

There is also the misconception that we need to have our stuff all together before God will accept us. Nothing could be further from the truth. God loves and accepts us just as we are and invites us to let go of our past guilt and struggles and find a new path that allows us to really experience life. And God has not only done this for us but offers grace and forgiveness to those we may not view as worthy. The truth is that none of us are -- or ever could be -- worthy enough on our own. We all need forgiveness; we all need a savior.

If we substitute the word "forgiveness" for love in the well-known Bible passage of 1 John, "we [forgive] because God has first [forgiven] us. We simply, if not easily, pass along the forgiveness we've experienced.

This parable is a dramatic interpretation of the petition in the Lord's Prayer in which we pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us." In many ways, this petition is a radical prayer. Does one really, truly want God to forgive us our sins in the precise manner and measure with which we offer our forgiveness to others?

As we think about God's forgiveness, I think it raises a question, "What image of church do we carry with us this week? What kind of community and nation do we want? What image of the church do we want the community around us to have of this church: one that judges people harshly or one that offers God's forgiving love in gratitude for the love and forgiveness poured out on us?"

The world makes certain assumptions and demands "What's in it for me?" God's forgiveness is one the world considers absurd, but one that can change the world.