

Year A-Pentecost13-Proper19

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Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiven Seventy-seven Times

How do you preach forgiveness, the very heart of the Christian gospel, ten years after our country experienced four commercial jets being taken over by some Islamic fundamentalists and ideologues who then flew those planes full of passengers into three buildings and a field in Pennsylvania causing the death of over three thousand people? The task for the day seems larger than my ability to address it. And I would not dare mention it except that I believe God's spirit is here and will help us.

We will start, as always, with scripture:

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

We said last week that this whole section of Matthew can only be understood in light of a very important pronouncement that Jesus made in Matthew 17:22.

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.’ And they were greatly distressed.

When the disciples learn that Jesus sees himself moving toward his own death, they are greatly distressed. They were very, very upset. This was entirely and utterly different than the plan they had in mind. And the business about being raised on the third day made absolutely no sense to them and just floated by without notice.

Matthew then arranges a series of sections that on the surface don't seem connected but when viewed through the disciple's refusal to hear what Jesus is telling them, make all the sense in the world.

The disciples ignore Jesus and ask him who will be the greatest in this new government they expect him to establish. It is as if they don't hear. They are in denial and continue to go forward with their plan hoping that Jesus will get the point and agree to follow. Without ever being direct, they place themselves in rivalry with Jesus.

Jesus sees this and so when they ask him who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven—this new order that Jesus will be bringing, Jesus places a child in the midst of them and says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Not only will you not lead, you won't even get in! Then he goes on to say, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

A child is formed by those they follow. Having little previous experience in the world they have no choice but to follow—that is what children do and they have no shame about it. This is precisely what the disciples are refusing to do. They don't want to follow Jesus and actually want Jesus to follow them. Their refusal to follow Jesus is their sin. For Jesus, sin is not a moral transgression, its not bad behavior; it is the refusal to follow their Lord.

We must understand this to correctly understand this morning's text. When Peter asks his question on how many times do you have to forgive someone, Peter doesn't see that he and the other disciples are the ones who have sinned. Peter and the disciples don't see that they are at-that-moment sinning because they are refusing to follow Jesus. In fact, Peter's very question functions to distance and dilute what is really going on. Actually, Peter is in rivalry with Jesus and wants Jesus to follow him. The question is hot air and a smoke screen.

In Peter's hypothetical question he assumes the position of being sinned against. Yet, at that very moment Jesus is already forgiving him. Peter had better hope forgiveness is 77 times, for his very relationship with Jesus depends on it. And the number seventy-seven is not literal but means beyond counting (you are at 67 so you had better be careful); we don't keep track. Is this true for us also? Do we all live in forgiveness?

We are now ready to hear the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and (This is amount equal to the wages for sixty million days.) (We think we have debt problems!), **as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'** (Does he have a realistic chance of ever paying it back? No. The amount is way beyond his means unless he lives to 600.) **And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.**

The irony here is that Jesus is tenderly putting up with Peter's rebelliousness at that very moment. Peter is the forgiven servant who owes more than he can ever repay but he can't see it.

The story moves on:

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; (a hundred days wages) **and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'" Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you.'** (Does this servant have a reasonable chance of paying it back? Yes, it is only a little over three month's wages.) **But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.** (Being in prison, does he now have a chance of paying his debt? No! You can't make money when you are locked up.)

The other slaves see this and they become **greatly distressed**. Before the disciples were **greatly distressed** about Jesus who announces his own coming death and resurrection.

Now, the slaves **are greatly distressed** with one of their own who won't forgive the tiny debt owed him even after his own huge debt has been forgiven. The words, "greatly distressed" are the same in both cases though they point in different directions. The disciples were distressed because Jesus was heading to the cross to show us the way of forgiveness. The slaves were

distressed because the forgiven slave showed no mercy even after his much greater debt had been released.

What Peter doesn't see is that he is the forgiven slave who now turns on his brother and demands to know how many times he has to forgive him. Peter acts as though there is a limit, when he has been forgiven everything, unconditionally.

In the story, the other slaves report the unforgiving one to their owner and there is an accounting. The story continues like this:

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all your debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

We are now ready to think about forgiveness in relation to 9/11. Have we as a country been forgiven our debt, our sin, our failure to follow Jesus?

Consider what we have done to the American Indians in this country. Consider what we have done to the Afro-Americans who our ancestors brought here as slaves. Consider the kind of stewards we have been to this beautiful land with our strip mines, our destructive farming techniques and our use of the rivers as open sewers for our waste. Consider all the collateral damage to countries all over the world caused by us in our attempt to rid the world of evil. Do these words of Jesus include us? "Yet I have forgiven you for all that you have done, ought you to forgive those who owe you a few denarii."

Has God forgiven us for these things? Yes! I believe so, for that is the gospel. There may still be consequences built into the way the world works but we are forgiven. Can we forgive as we have been forgiven?

But then what do we do with the stories dramatic ending?

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Does this not contradict forgiveness and imply payback and retribution? Could it be that we bring torture and death on ourselves when we don't forgive? Jesus tells these parables to wake

us up and provoke us to see things from a new perspective. Though Jesus refers to his heavenly father in the story, the problems caused by un-forgiveness don't come from God; we create them as a consequence of our choices. God just doesn't get in the way and protect us from what we do to ourselves. Bad things happen when we refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart. But God forgives and in that sense is very different from the story's first century autocrat.

Since we have been forgiven, do we place forgiveness at the center of our lives? Do we forgive our neighbor, our children, our family, our parents, our brothers and sisters in the family or in the church? There is an oft-told story of one prisoner of war who asked another, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?"

"I will never do that," the second one answered.

"Then they still have you in prison, don't they?" the first one replied.

Do you think Boyd Ringo forgave his Japanese captors? (On this particular Sunday we are worshiping outdoors in a pavilion built in honor of a prisoner of war, Boyd Ringo, who dedicated his life to his community in response to the horrors of what he had experienced.) Do you think this pavilion would have been built had he not? I know for a fact he did forgive them. The whole building of this structure was driven by forgiveness.

Strangely, Matthew says we will be held accountable to God and the criteria will be whether or not we forgive. If we don't forgive, we make life hell for ourselves and others here on this earth. But even when we don't forgive, we are forgiven, for that is the very nature of God, revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus—the very event the disciples did not want to happen. With Peter, we are forgiven seventy-seven times. Thanks be to God. Amen.