

Sunday, September 13, 2020
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (Year A)

Matthew 18.21-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/728678441316151>

(Sermon begins at about 14:45)

“How Often Should I Forgive?”

There is something about us humans that we want to know exactly what the limits are. For some, it's because of concern about crossing that threshold into the unacceptable; so, knowing the limits helps avoid doing so. For some, it is about having as much leeway as possible; so, knowing the limits gives an idea of just how far one can push the envelope. And for some, it's about not having to go one inch further than absolutely necessary; so, knowing the limits provides a line in the sand. Which of these is behind Peter wanting to know the limit for forgiving someone?

“Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’” (Mt 18.21). Is Peter looking for an absolute limit? Forgiving seven times is okay, but eight is too much and therefore out of the question? Or is Peter wanting to make sure that he forgives enough? Hopefully, Peter was concerned because of the latter as opposed to the former. That he wanted to be sure that he was adequately forgiving as opposed to not wanting to forgive any more than necessary.

Jesus responds: “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Mt 18.22). Some translations render Jesus' response as “seventy times seven.” Wow! That much, huh? That's a lot of forgiveness!

It's interesting that Peter chooses seven as the benchmark in his question. In Hebrew numerology, seven is a holy number. Seven is the number of completion, of perfection. A fact that he would have been well-aware of. This being the case, one commentator notes:

Peter's suggestion that he must forgive up to seven times is not an attempt to place a limit on forgiveness. In fact, since seven is a holy number, Peter is probably asking something like, “must I practice perfect forgiveness?” To which Jesus responds, “not seven times, but . . . seventy-seven (or seventy times seven).” While the exact number is not clear in the Greek, the point of the number is. Your forgiveness must be beyond perfect; it must be beyond counting. Forgiveness becomes an absolute. Christian theology has, for the most part, accepted the principle of absolute forgiveness but not the practice.¹

In responding seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven times, Jesus is saying, “you keep on forgiving for as long as necessary, even if it takes forever.”

Jesus then presents a parable to illustrate what God's forgiveness is like. He uses the image of a slave who owes money to his king. Now, the king is meant to represent God, but some of the

actions of the king in the parable are a little un-God-like. But you have to make the story at least somewhat believable. To better understand the parable and to have a greater appreciation for what Jesus is conveying, it helps if we first define our terms. Particularly since Jesus uses monetary terms that are literally foreign to us. So, what is a talent? What is a denarius?

The talent was an ancient unit of weight and of value. Different cultures seemed to have defined it in different ways, although it was generally one of the largest units of measure. For our purposes, I'm going with the definition in my study Bible. That a talent was more than 15 years wages for a laborer. At the current minimum wage for California, and assuming a year's wages to be based on a 40-hour workweek, one talent would be approximately \$400,000. So, the 10,000 talents the slave owed the king in the parable would be about \$4 billion in today's terms.

The denarius was the usual days wages for a laborer. At our current minimum wage, that would be \$104, based on an eight-hour day. So, the 100 denarii the second slave owed the first one would therefore be \$10,400 in today's terms.

Putting the parable in contemporary financial terms means that the first slave owes the king \$4 billion. When he is unable to pay—of course he can't pay that amount, he's a slave—he pleads for a little more time to pay it. Yeah, right, like that's going to happen. Instead of selling the slave and his family to recoup at least a little of his loss, the king has mercy and completely forgives the debt. Just writes off the entire \$4 billion. The slave then runs across another slave who owes him a mere \$10,400. Instead of remembering the mercy shown him by the king, he insists the other slave pay up immediately. When the second slave begs for more time, the first slave has him thrown into prison. When the king hears about this, he becomes enraged, reverses his earlier decision, and throws the first slave in prison until he can pay off the entire \$4 billion. Which obviously is not going to happen with the slave in prison.

The situation being described in the parable is absolutely absurd, to say the least. No slave could possibly wrack up that kind of debt. There is certainly no way the slave could repay that much money, which further makes his promise to do so another absurd element in the story. And then, there is certainly no way the king would forgive such an enormous debt out of the goodness of his heart. Of course, the circumstances are presented for effect. As one commentator notes: "Traditional sources quickly reassure Christians . . . that it is never the king's desire to punish the servant, nor is it God's desire to punish sinners. Quite the contrary—the king's threat, like God's law, is a mirror that brings the servant/sinner to self-knowledge and repentance. Only when debtors acknowledge the overwhelming weight of their debt can they see the true greatness of God's mercy."²

In other words, when we talk about how we are to forgive others, we first must recognize why we need to forgive. We need to be self-reflective and recognize just how much debt we carry—what sins we have committed—that God has just wiped away out of the goodness of his heart. Considering that, the difference in number of times forgiven—be it seven, seventy-seven, or seventy times seven—is immaterial. The real issue is that human forgiveness is modeled on and within the context of divine forgiveness. The parable clearly demonstrates that the king's

preference—that God’s preference—is a direct call for us to forgive one another because God forgives us.

As to the extent of that forgiveness, which is essentially what Peter is asking? Well, his question is one that has plagued Christians since Peter first uttered those words, “how often should I forgive?” While that has been an ongoing question, theologians are in agreement that “Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus’ answer—whether translated ‘seventy-seven’ or ‘seventy times seven’—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God’s forgiveness has its limits.”³

What? There are limits to God’s forgiveness? Well, that is certainly the implication of Jesus’ parable. As we see, “The excessive severity of this lord returns when the slave’s fellow slaves report him. The lord’s forgiveness, it turns out, is conditional. But the condition is a narrow one. Forgiveness must engender forgiveness. The forgiven must forgive others.”⁴

As Episcopal priest Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn notes, this is all ultimately for the good of the community, for the health of the community. She writes, “The concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church.”⁵

That’s all well and good. But about this time, I’m sure there are some who are getting a little nervous. What about that person you just can’t forgive? Who has done something that you are unable to forgive? That’s a tough one. I get it. And while there is no easy answer, perhaps this will help.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story: A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, “since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he’s living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?” I answer her, “I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn’t; it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding onto him. You’re not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you’re hurting yourself.”⁶

There are those people, those situations, which we just cannot bring ourselves to forgive. At least not right now. Part of forgiving—part of the reason for forgiving—is because it is the loving thing to do. And there are times when we need to think about forgiving someone, not to be loving toward them, but to be loving toward our self. To try to truly put that person and whatever happened behind us so that we can move on into a better and healthier future. Forgiving does not always mean reconciliation, that you have to be in relationship with the person. Sometimes that is not possible. Sometimes that is not the healthy thing to do. But

forgiveness, as hard as it may be to believe, is always the healthy and most loving thing to do. Or, as theologian Lewis Smedes so eloquently put it: “to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”⁷

Perhaps that is why Jesus puts such an emphasis on forgiveness. It is about creating and maintaining the health of the body. Be it the Body of Christ or the individual member of the Body. Even if forgiving might take a time or two. Or seven. Or seventy-seven. Or seventy times seven.

¹ Lewis R. Donelson, “Proper 19, Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 69.

² Kathryn D. Blanchard, “Proper 19, Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, 70.

³ Blanchard, “Proper 19, Theological Perspective,” 68.

⁴ Lewis R. Donelson, “Proper 19, Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, 73.

⁵ Charles Campbell, “Proper 19, Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, 69.

⁶ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, “Proper 19, Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, 72.

⁷ Lewis Smedes, quoted in Anne Lamott, *Small Victories* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014), 117.