

Sunday, September 17, 2023
Sixteenth 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/313428458037965>

(Sermon begins at about 19:30)

“The Price of Forgiveness”

What price would you put on the forgiveness of your sins?

That is sort of the unspoken question in today’s Gospel reading. Peter starts off asking Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” To which Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Now, the implication, albeit a little unclear, is that Peter wants to know how many times he should forgive someone who repeatedly sins against him. While the number seven in Hebrew thought is often used to symbolize perfection or completeness, it is apparent that Peter is not thinking in those terms. He is thinking more in terms of what is the minimum number of times he is obligated to forgive someone. You have to admit, forgiving someone who repeatedly sins against you seven times is pretty generous, and shows a good deal of patience. But there is an implied follow-on in Peter’s question: and after seven times, all bets are off, right? I can then seek vengeance, right? I can end the relationship with that person, right?

Not so fast, Peter. In responding with “not seven times, but . . . seventy-seven times,” Jesus, invoking the image of double sevens, of multiples of seven, is emphasizing the symbolic nature of the number seven. That of completeness, of perfection. Implying that he must forgive as many times as it takes. Even if it takes forever. That Peter, that all of us, are to strive to completely forgive one who has aggrieved us. That we are to continually forgive, as often as is needed. World without end, Amen.

Because the extent of the forgiveness Jesus was talking about would have been a bit mind-blowing to his original hearers, he uses Peter’s query to tell a parable about the nature of forgiveness from God’s perspective. But this is more than just a story to convey the extent of God’s forgiveness. This is also a story to convey how we are to view forgiveness in our own lives. Jesus starts off not by saying “God’s forgiveness is like . . .” Which it is, and more. Rather, Jesus says “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . .” The kingdom of heaven being God’s kingdom of which we are a part and in which we, as God’s children, participate. This parable is not just about the technicalities of forgiveness, as Peter seems to be asking, but about forgiveness as a way of life, as a way of being, for God’s beloveds. For us.

In the parable, a king intends to sell a slave who has racked up a debt of ten thousand talents that he is apparently unable to repay. When the slave begs for mercy, promising to repay what is owed, the king does have pity on the slave. While it would be perfectly within his right to hold the slave to his promise to repay the debt in its entirety, the king does something completely

unexpected. He doesn't just give the slave more time to pay the debt. Instead, he forgives the debt. All of it. All ten thousand talents. Pretty darn generous, as we will see in a few moments.

You'd think the slave would be so grateful, so relieved, that his entire debt was forgiven. But when he immediately comes across a fellow slave who owes him a hundred denarii, a far lesser amount than the first slave owed the king—far less than the amount forgiven—the first slave demands immediate payment. And when the second slave begs for mercy, just as the first slave had done with the king, the first slave is merciless, throwing the second in prison. And then follows the retribution. If the first slave thinks so little of the king's merciful forgiveness that he is not willing to extend that to his fellow slave, then the king will do to the first slave what was done to the second. The king will do to the first slave what he intended to do in the first place. In other words, if you (first slave) are not going to show mercy, why should I? Although the king in the parable puts it in a slightly more positive light: "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

The parable is intended to do two things. First is to show the extent of God's forgiveness to those who seek it. And second, to show the extent that we are to forgive others; that those who receive the benefit of God's forgiveness are to do likewise. That we who are so generously forgiven by God are also to forgive those who sin against us. As we are reminded every time we say the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Essentially getting back to Peter's original question.

I ask again, what price would you put on the forgiveness of your sins? Or rather, what value would you place on the forgiveness of your sins? That is really what the bulk of this parable is about.

So let's calculate that value, shall we? To fully appreciate the meaning behind this parable, we need to understand a few terms: talents and denarii. Denarii and talents were common weights of measure in the ancient Near East. In some cultures, eventually becoming a standard for currency. While the exact measure and meaning tended to vary somewhat, in Jesus' time, one denarius was a day's wages for a common laborer. So, if we were to use the California minimum wage of \$15.50 per hour, and assuming our standards eight-hour workday, a denarius would be the equivalent of \$124. A talent, on the other hand, was worth 6,000 denarii. Roughly 20 years wages. Or \$744,000 using the our California minimum wage. So, the first slave, owing the king ten thousand talents, would have owed him the equivalent of roughly \$7.5 billion. And the second slave, owing the first slave one hundred denarii, would have owed the equivalent of \$12,400. A mere pittance compared to what the first slave owed.

When placed in contemporary monetary terms, you begin to see the magnitude of what Jesus was talking about. The extravagant generosity of God's mercy being immediately recognized by Jesus' original hearers. So incomprehensible that they would have taken notice that this hyperbole was indicative of something profoundly significant. That God's forgiveness is so vast, so expansive. For all intents and purposes, beyond measure and beyond comprehension. Something worth far more than we could ever possibly repay. Something that is given to us with no strings attached. Well, okay, that is not quite true. God does ask that we forgive others, just as he has forgiven us. But just as in the juxtaposition between the debt owed by the first

slave and the debt owed by the second slave, what we are asked to forgive others for pales in comparison to all that God forgives us for. If God forgives us, the least we can do is to make a reasonable effort to forgive others. If God forgives us so extravagantly, the least we can do is extend to others a small amount of the forgiveness we have received from God.

Of course, when talking about forgiveness, there is always the necessary and all-important caveat. Yes, we are called to forgive, just as God has forgiven us. But . . . While God is capable of forgiving anything no matter what, we humans are not always willing or able to forgive anything no matter what. There are limits to our ability to forgive. Particularly in situations involving ongoing dynamics that are unhealthy, even dangerous or life-threatening. Situations that entail injustice and degradation of the fundamental rights and inherent value of another. The classic example being situations involving abuse. An abused person should not be pushed to forgive their abuser. And they certainly should not be forced to stay in an abusive relationship. Sure, forgiveness may be possible in time and with distance from the situation; and likely with lots of therapy and support from loved ones. May be possible. But certainly not expected or required. Forgiveness is, at its basics, a form of healing. And sometimes, healing requires complete elimination of and removal from that which is unhealthy in the first place. Not unlike the removal of cancer from an otherwise healthy body. Ultimately, what God desires for all his beloved's is health and wholeness, in all its forms: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational.

In a clever way, the parable Jesus conveys takes such circumstances into account. It is for this reason Jesus constructs a situation in which the one forgiving is in a position of power and security, as opposed to one who is in a weaker social position—one who does not necessarily have the luxury of being able to grant forgiveness. Especially such extravagant forgiveness of a major offense that has caused serious, potentially irreparable harm. Recognition that forgiveness should not be confused with complacency or submission. That the process of forgiving is completely consistent with taking necessary steps to protect oneself through removal from unhealthy or dangerous situations and relationships.

Our Gospel reading for today starts with a question. The question of how often we are to forgive those who sin against us. To answer that, as children of God and members of the Body of Christ, we need only look to how we ourselves are forgiven by our God. The One who loves us so much that he is willing and does forgive us in wildly extravagant ways. In ways beyond our comprehension. In return, we are to extend that same grace to those who have sinned against us—sins that pale in comparison to our sins against God. Extending forgiveness that likewise pales in comparison to that which we receive from God. It is not a zero sum game. Quite the opposite.

So, I ask again, what price would you put on the forgiveness of your sins? While we can never pay that full debt, thankfully we don't have to. That debt has been forgiven. Perhaps the price we can pay is in doing likewise and forgiving others.