

Proper 19, Year A

September 4, 2014b

Matthew 18:21-35

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?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason 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, 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.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; 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.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 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."

There is a successful television drama series on ABC, now in its fourth season, titled "Revenge". In promotional trailers, the main character of the show lays out the premise for the storyline, saying this:

Hamlet, Medea, Captain Ahab, Charles Bronson. The icons of vengeance teach us that for the truly wronged, real satisfaction can only be found in one of two places: absolute forgiveness or mortal vindication.

This is not a story about forgiveness. (*taken from the show's web site*)

"This is not a story about forgiveness." That's how the show's producers are pitch their show "Revenge." Unforgiveness sells.

For years we have heard parents' groups protesting against violence on television, or loose sexual morality on television, and what that has been doing to our children. But I have not read about or heard any outcry about this and other shows which feed on vengeance, the very antithesis of Jesus' teaching, reflected so clearly in today's Gospel.

In our Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter is asking about the limits of forgiveness. He is ready to retaliate; he just needs to know when he can. He is of the mindset (not uncommon) that believes forgiveness is putting the brakes on the “natural and justifiable” process of retaliation and revenge. He wants Jesus to tell him when it’s OK to lift his foot off the brake.

The rabbis of Jesus’ day taught that a good Jew should forgive three times. Peter knows Jesus is an unusually forgiving man, so he ventures a more generous number of required times to forgive—seven. But Jesus is not interested in keeping accounts. “Not seven times,” he responds to Peter, “but seventy-seven times” – or perhaps a better translation (as found in several English Bible translations) is “seventy-times seven”.

And then Jesus tells a story about a king who has mercy on one of his servants, forgiving him a debt of 10,000 talents. Now a talent was the largest possible measure of money in Jesus’ day, equal to about 15 years’ wages for a day laborer. 10,000 talents was thus equal to wages which it would take an average worker in those days 150,000 years to earn. Needless to say, it was an impossible amount to repay! The king would have every right, according to the ancient Law, to sell this man and his whole family into slavery, though that would in no way *begin* to repay the debt. But this king chooses instead an unexplained and extravagant mercy, forgiving the entire amount owed!

If we aren’t shocked when we hear this parable, we aren’t listening.

Huston Smith was perhaps the 20th Century’s foremost expert on world religions. He once gave a talk at Duke University in which he listed one or two traits which made each of the world’s religions unique and noteworthy. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – each religion had one or two singular characteristics which Smith noted. The students of Duke (which is a Methodist school) waited with bated breath to hear what Smith felt was most characteristic of Christianity. It was forgiveness. Forgiveness. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, #3, p.46) The first words of Jesus from the cross were “Father, forgive them.” Nowhere in all of the New Testament do we find any place where Jesus or his followers expect or exact revenge for the brutal and unjustified crucifixion of Jesus. Quite the contrary! Jesus forgives those who crucified him (and we are **all** *complicit* in his crucifixion), and it frees us for a new future! Unforgiveness and retaliation are about the past; forgiveness is about the future.

In our Gospel parable, we have a man who has made a grievous mistake, symbolized by the monumental debt which it would be impossible for him ever to repay. In the King’s justice, a judgment is made that all the man’s possessions be sold, and that the man himself, together with his wife and children, be sold into

slavery, even though this would barely raise enough money to scratch the surface of the debt. The judgment effectively destroys the life of the man and his family – and will likely continue to destroy his family for generations to come. He has made a huge mistake which will put him and his family in bondage forever. He pleads for more time to pay the debt, but the reality is that there isn't enough time: it would take 150,000 years to pay off the debt.

There is no way justice can save the man and his family. There is no way justice can save them. In the words of Martin Luther: The Law does not save; the Law puts to death. The man in this Gospel story is enslaved and imprisoned by his mistake, his debt, his sin; and his whole family is imprisoned with him. For them, there is no remedy in justice. No hope. No future.

But God **wants** for his people hope, and a future! In one of the most beloved passages of the Old Testament, we read: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord... plans to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) And yet without forgiveness, we are **without** a future and hope, tied to our mistakes, like the servant at the beginning of our Gospel story; and this is **not** what God wants for us, or for any of his children.

“Forgiveness, you see,” writes David Lose, “is ultimately a decision about the past – the decision to accept both that *you cannot change the past* and also that *the past does not have to hold you captive*. Forgiveness is a decision about the past that ultimately determines the future. When you forgive, you release the past and enter into an open future. When you cannot forgive, you remain captive to that past until the end of time. Forgiveness, in this sense, *is* freedom, freedom from the past, freedom for the future, the kind of freedom God wants for each of us.” (<http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-14-a/>)

Sometimes we hear the words put together, “Forgive and forget.” But forgiving doesn't mean we forget. When we forgive, we don't give up *the memory*, we give up *our right to get even*, so that the wrong done no longer exercises power over our future. We give up our right to get even, so that the wrong done no longer exercises power over our future. Richard Rohr says that he used to think that receiving forgiveness was for the sake of moral purity. The priest pronounces absolution over us, and we become morally pure once again. But Rohr says that he now realizes that forgiveness is not about moral purity; it is quite simply for the sake of the future. We might say to ourselves, “I have a right to my anger! I have a right to my wounds!” But this will not create any kind of future. Resentment and revenge do not create any positive kind of future. As Fr. Rohr often says, “If we don't transform our pain, we will continue to transmit it.”

And this is exactly what happens in the *second* part of our Gospel parable. The servant who had been forgiven so much does not allow that stream of mercy to flow out **from** him to others – to transform him. No sooner does he leave the King's throne room, where divine mercy has been poured out upon him, than he

meets a fellow servant who owes him a debt – not 150,000 years’ wages, but 100 days’ wages; and he who had been forgiven so much refuses to forgive in return. He holds his fellow servant’s mistakes against him, and imprisons him in those mistakes, even though the King had just released him from far greater sins. The result is what happens whenever we refuse to allow the flow of God’s love and mercy *out from* us to others: the flow of God’s love and mercy *INTO* us stops. It is not that God doesn’t *want* to continue to pour his grace and forgiveness through us; He **CAN’T**. That’s simply the way mercy and forgiveness work. Forgiveness is not about discreet events which can be listed in a ledger: Transgression, forgiveness; transgression, forgiveness. It is a **flow**, and if the flow of forgiveness *out from* us stops, so does the flow of forgiveness *into* us. “If you do not forgive others,” Jesus preaches in his Sermon on the Mount, “neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:15) Forgiveness either flows in **AND** out, or it doesn’t flow at all.

Albert Einstein was not only an intellectual giant; he was a philosopher. Richard Rohr calls him a mystic. Einstein once said, “Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” We might apply that to our Gospel: Like the man at the beginning of our parable, we find ourselves hopelessly imprisoned by our mistakes. The level of thinking that created this problem was a level of thinking which says, “Justice requires that payment must be made for each of my transgressions; and justice must be served.” But within that mindset, there is no hope, no future. 150,000 years’ worth of paying back wouldn’t be enough. There is no way that that level of thinking we call “justice” can solve the problem. Another level of thinking, another consciousness, another attitude and mindset entirely is the only way out. It must be a mindset in which mistakes do not imprison us to the past and take away all future and hope.

Forgiveness is not a singular response to a singular transgression. Like love, it cannot be counted or quantified. Like love, forgiveness is about being part of an unending flow of mercy pouring out from the Father into the Son through the Holy Spirit into us; and out from us into others, and others, and others: an ever-flowing stream.

Jesus calls us to enter into that divine flow of mercy, which alone can free us, and all those around us, for a future and hope.

AMEN