

Proper 19, Year A

September 17, 2017

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."

A popular television drama titled "Revenge" aired on ABC from 2011-2015. It regularly won its time slot over the other networks' programming, and it was nominated in 2012 for Favorite New TV Drama at the People's Choice Awards. 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 pitched their show "Revenge." Unforgiveness sells.

For years we have heard parents' groups protesting the violence or loose sexual morality on television or in video games or on social media, concerned about what that has been doing to our children. But I have never heard any outcry about

television shows, video games, or social media which feed on vengeance, which is the very antithesis of Jesus' teaching, as we see so clearly in today's Gospel.

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.

Now, 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."

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 **one** talent was about 130 pounds of silver, equal to about 15 years' wages for a day laborer. Needless to say, 10,000 talents was an *impossible* amount to repay – it would take the man 150,000 years to repay! The king would have every right, according to ancient Law, to sell this man and his whole family into slavery. But this king chooses instead an extravagant mercy, forgiving the entire amount owed!

If we aren't *shocked* when we hear this parable, we aren't paying attention.

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 at Duke (which is a Methodist school) waited with bated breath to hear what Smith felt was most characteristic of Christianity. It was forgiveness. Forgiveness.¹ The first words of Jesus from the cross were "Father, forgive them."² Nowhere in all of the New Testament do we find any place where Jesus or any of his post-resurrection followers exact revenge for the brutal and unjustified crucifixion of Jesus. Quite the contrary! Jesus, nailed to the cross, forgives those who crucified him; and after his resurrection, he never mentions either his crucifixion or his disciples' abandonment of him the night before he was crucified. It is all in the past.

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. This judgment effectively destroys the life of the man and his family – and will likely continue to destroy his family for countless generations to come. He has made a huge mistake which will put him and his family and their descendants in bondage forever. He pleads for more time to pay the debt, but the reality is that it is impossible for him to pay it off: it would take 150,000 years.

The man is enslaved and imprisoned by his mistake, his debt, his sin; and his whole family with him. There is no remedy afforded by justice. No hope. No future.

But hope and a future are exactly what God *wants* for God's people! 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." ³ And that cannot come, for the man in our parable, through the meting out of justice, but only through mercy and forgiveness.

"Forgiveness," writes David Lose, "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." ⁴

Now, 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, or the future of the person we are forgiving. Let me say that again: In forgiveness, we give up our right to get even, our right to cling to our hurt, so that the wrong done no longer exercises power over our future or the future of the person we are forgiving. As Richard 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 very servant who had been forgiven so much does not allow that stream of mercy to flow out **from** him to others. No sooner does he leave the king's throne room, where divine, extravagant 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 any consequence of **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; God CAN'T. That's simply the way mercy and forgiveness work. Forgiveness is not about discreet events which can be listed and balanced off in a ledger: Transgression balanced by an equal amount of payment or forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness 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 [heavenly] Father forgive your trespasses." ⁵ Forgiveness either flows in AND out, or it doesn't flow at all.

Albert Einstein once said, “Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.”⁶ We might apply that to our parable: Like the man at the beginning of our parable, **we** find ourselves in deep debt to God and to others because of our many transgressions, our many sins. The level of thinking from which we normally function is justice, or quid-pro-quo. Justice requires that payment must be made for our transgressions; and our usual mindset tells us that justice **must** be served. But within that mindset, there is no hope for us, no future, for our sins against God and against our neighbor are countless. There is no way that the level of thinking we call “justice” can solve our 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. That alternative mindset is the mindset of forgiveness. And like love, forgiveness is about being part of an unending flow pouring out from the Father into the Son through the Holy Spirit and into us; and out from us into others, and others, and others, and back to God, in an endless, ever-flowing stream.

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

AMEN

¹ *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, #3, p.46

² Luke 23:34

³ Jeremiah 29:11

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-14-a/>

⁵ Matthew 6:15

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/320600-we-can-not-solve-our-problems-with-the-same-level>