

The Foolishness of Forgiveness

This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 17th, 2017. The texts were Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35.

*'Forgive our sins as we forgive,'
you taught us, Lord, to pray,
but you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say.*

*How can your pardon reach and bless
the unforgiving heart,
that broods on wrongs and will not let
old bitterness depart?*

*In blazing light your cross reveals
the truth we dimly knew:
what trivial debts are owed to us,
how great our debt to you!*

*Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
and bid resentment cease;
then, bound to all in bonds of love,
our lives will spread your peace.*

I recently heard it said that “you don't grow up until you forgive your parents.”

I suppose it could also be said that you don't grow up until you forgive your spouse, and your children, and your boss, and your pastor, and your doctor, and your sister, and even and especially, you don't grow up until you forgive your self.

Maybe you're thinking, yes, of course, we need to forgive, but not too soon, and not too often. Don't forgive before the other person repents. Not before he apologizes for what he said. Not before I see some sign of change from her. Not until he promises to make a down payment on that loan. Not until she quits drinking, and not until he stops abusing. Yes, I'll forgive when I get ready to forgive, but not too soon, and not too often, lest I appear to be foolish and weak.

Some people think that if you forgive somebody it means that you need to go back into the same relationship that you had before. So, if she was a friend who made a habit of betraying you, well then, forgive her and be friends, even though she likely will betray you all over again. But forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation, that is, restoring a relationship to the way it was, especially a relationship that has been abusive and holds no promise for change.

Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness, especially in Matthew's Gospel, is rather for our own well-being and especially the well-being of the faith community called the church.

Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes writes, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. The first person who benefits from the forgiving is the person who does the forgiving... Forgiving is, first of all, a way of helping yourself to get free of the unfair pain somebody caused you. The most unfair thing about unfair pain is that you should go on suffering it in your bitterness and misery when there is such a simple remedy for it.” So Ephesians

encourages us to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

The first person to get the benefits of forgiving is the person who does the forgiving, because holding deeply held grudges affects me more than the person who is begrudged. Forgiveness, first all, heals me.

Smedes tells the story of a mother whose five year old son was killed by a drunk driver right in front of her own house. The mother said that for two years she lived in the fog of terrible rage. She fantasized about the most horrible things that could happen to the man who killed her child. She wanted him to suffer more than he had made her suffer.

After living in the misery of her unhealed rage for two years, the woman woke up to the fact that the drunk driver who had killed her son was now killing her—killing her soul little by little. She was helping him do it.

The woman went to her priest who listened to her story then told her what she already knew, that the only way out of her pain was to begin the journey of forgiveness, forgiveness even for this man who had done such a horrible thing to her. But her priest said that there was something that they had to do first. They had to begin a chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving in their town. They had to make it clearly known that if you forgive a drunk driver it does not mean that you tolerate drunk driving.

Forgive those who wrong you, but do not tolerate the wrongs. Love the sinner, but hate the sin. Tell them what Jesus told those whom he forgave: You are forgiven for what you did, now go and sin no more. Stop it and don’t do it again.” Because Jesus was no doormat for others; neither are we doormats for those whom we would forgive. I tend to think of forgiveness as not allowing past behaviors to determine how I will act in the present. I think of forgiveness as being released from the domination and control which those past events have held over my life. And the first person to be forgiven—the first prisoner to be set free—is me.

If I have not experienced forgiveness, how can I forgive others? If I have never had any debts canceled, how can I cancel the debts of others? “Don’t you realize,” says Paul in Romans, “that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye,” Jesus asks, “but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or, how can you say to your sister, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5).

We forgive because we have been forgiven.

We lavish upon others what is lavished upon us.

Peter seems to think of forgiveness as a burdensome obligation: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often *should* (emphasis mine) I forgive? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:15). Here is a question that is centered on *the quantity* of forgiveness rather than the *quality* of forgiveness.

Peter’s question is my question, “How often *should* I forgive this congregation? How often *should* I forgive this congregation for its habitual absence from worship; for its apathy about the well-being of the church; for its casual take-it-or-leave attitude about public worship; for its stubborn conviction that just about everything else is more important on Sunday mornings than being here. “Lord, how often *should* I forgive?” There has to be a limit, and sometimes I think I’m reaching mine.

Like Peter, I treat forgiveness as a burdensome obligation, a question centered on *quantity*.

How much more? And Jesus says, for your own well-being, and for the well-being of the church, I suggest forgiveness as unlimited opportunity—“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven”—a statement that is centered on the *quality* of forgiveness. Seventy times seven, so that you are not destroyed by the absence, the apathy, and the take-it-or-leave-it attitudes—all of which you’re not going to be able to change.

Peter’s suggestion reminds me of a cartoon about the prodigal son. The father is going down the road to meet his boy. The caption reads, “I sure will be glad when that boy finally grows up. This is the sixth fatted calf that I’ve had to kill.”

Forgiveness is not about numbers. Forgiveness is about an attitude, a way of life that is beyond our calculation or comprehension. It is a readiness to give what we ourselves have already received so abundantly.

St. Maximos the Confessor offered this: “The person who has come to know the weakness of human nature has gained experience of divine power. Such a person never belittles anyone. He knows that God is like a good and loving physician who heals with individual treatment each of those who are trying to make progress.”

“In this way Joseph reassured them, speaking kindly to his brothers” (Genesis 50:21).

“Be merciful,” says Jesus, “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

“Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors,” we pray (Matthew 6:12).

“Accept one another, just as God has accepted you” (Romans 15:7).