

"Forgive Us, As We Forgive"

Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon by Richard Neff – 8/20/2017

Prayer of Illumination

Blessed God, who caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning; grant us so to hear your word, and to receive and hold your message in our hearts and minds, so that we may be guided in your way and do your will. Amen.

Sermon

I have decided to do something a little different today from what Hal and Gary did these past two Sundays. I could tell you about my approach to scripture and how it has changed over the years, but my story would almost match what Hal said two weeks ago so I do not want to repeat that. And I thought Gary did a masterful job last week talking about how the Bible was written by and reflects the views of the oppressed people in Israel's society, and the fact that we are in the upper strata of our society makes it difficult sometimes to relate to what is happening in biblical stories. So I thought there was no need to travel down that road again.

What I have decided to do is talk a little bit about how I approach putting a sermon together, and in doing that perhaps you will see how I understand and interpret scripture. I believe my contribution to this series of sermons will be to point out that the people we meet on the pages of scripture are real live human beings. They are not plastic statues or stained glass figures with halos around their heads. They are people like us with human emotions and feelings and failings. But more of that later.

First I would like to take a moment of personal privilege. **(Put up slide of church)** You see 62 years ago today a momentous event took place at the Market Square Presbyterian Church in Harrisburg, PA.. **(slide of us walking down the aisle)**. That was the day Trudy and I were married. You can see we haven't changed a bit.

Now on to the project of building a sermon. When I begin working on a text for a sermon there are three basic questions I ask.

- 1. What **really** is happening in this passage of scripture?
- 2. How does what really is happening in the scripture relate to life in our world/society today?
- 3. What is the "good news" found in this passage of scripture?

Now how do I answer those three questions in building a sermon? Let's look at the scripture passage I have chosen for my sermon today. The first two verses are:

- Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another person 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 times seven." - Matthew 18:21-22

Now what is really going on here? I don't believe Peter got up one morning and said, "I think I'll ask Jesus about forgiveness today. He hasn't talked about that for a while." No, someone was bugging Peter. Maybe his wife was saying, "You have been traipsing all over Galilee with this Jesus and meanwhile your fishing business has gone to pot, we're running out of money, your children are growing up without you, and I am getting tired of taking care of everything at home. If you don't stop this insane quest with this man who thinks he is the Messiah, everything at home will fall apart. Besides you know what happens to all these people who think they are the messiahs who will set Israel free from Rome. They end up dead, and I don't want that to happen to you." And Peter is saying, "Lord, how long do I have to put up with this."

Or maybe it was his brother. Andrew was also a disciple to Jesus, and maybe Andrew was on his case. "Peter, you always have acted like the big cheese. You have to be out front running everything. Why don't you realize that you are no better than the rest of us. Stop sidling up to Jesus all the time. All you are doing is impressing him with your stupidity. You keep sticking your foot in your mouth." And Peter is saying, "Lord, my brother has always been jealous of me. How long must I put up with this?"

So maybe it wasn't Peter's wife or Andrew his brother, but someone was riding him and the real question he was asking Jesus was, "Lord, you talk about forgiveness and say we are to forgive, but how long must I put up with this abuse?"

Now what Peter was experiencing is no different from what everyone of us experiences. You cannot live in relationship with other people without forgiving and being forgiven. Every day in so many different ways we step on one another's toes.

- Someone teases us and we take offense and we say how long must I put up with this?
- We are working on a project and someone criticizes us and steps in saying, "Here, let me show you how to do that." And we say, "How long must I put up with this?"
- Or someone passes false rumors about us and we wonder, "How long do I have to endure this?"
- Or we tell something to another person in confidence and they betray that confidence and we wonder how we can ever forgive that person.

Or we do any one of these things to someone else and we are the ones who need to be forgiven.

And then there are the bigger issues. Anger builds up within us and something triggers an explosion. We say things we should never say and sometimes do things that are destructive, and we need someone to forgive us.

There are ten thousand different ways we offend others and are offended by others and we could spend an hour or more listing them all. The point is that as we live we need to forgive and to be forgiven.

In putting together my sermon I begin with where we are in our relationships with other people by using examples like the ones I just mentioned, and then I go on to say that this is exactly what Peter was experiencing and bring in the examples of what might have been going on in his experience when he asked that question of Jesus.

Before we move on to the answer Jesus gave to Peter's question let me make a couple observations. This passage of scripture is pretty clear of textual problems, but there are a couple issues in translation. First, the RSV translates the conditional phrase in Peter's question, "If my brother sins against me," whereas the NRSV translates it "If another member of the church sins against me." Now, I take exception to the translation "another member of the church." The word in the original text is the word for "brother", and the NRSV translator applies that in the very narrow sense of a Christian brother. But Jesus did not say in the prayer he gave to his disciples which we repeat every Sunday, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors who are members of the church." I believe Jesus wants us to forgive others in the broad sense of that word, not in the very limited sense of those who are "in the church".

Now we come to the answer Jesus gave to Peter's question. I'm certain that Peter believed he was being very generous with his forgiveness when he was willing to forgive a person seven times. And when he heard Jesus' answer that there should be no limit to our forgiveness, I can imagine Peter thought, "That's crazy, you can't let people walk all over you without pushing back and retaliating." I believe Peter was truly shocked at Jesus answer, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven."

There is a question about the number in Jesus' reply to Peter. In the NRSV Bible the number is "77 times" and in the RSV it is "seventy times seven". This really isn't a major problem because it is obvious that Jesus was not saying you keep count until it gets to 78 or 491 and then you can lower the boom. Jesus is saying there is no limit to the times you forgive a brother or sister or friend or co-worker or anyone else. I'm certain Peter was not expecting that answer, and if we have been there we would not be expecting it either

Following this exchange with Peter, Jesus reinforces his message about forgiveness by telling a story, what we call a parable.

- Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 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 servant fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay your everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. - Matthew 18:23-27

We immediately recognize when Jesus introduces the idea that this parable involves the Kingdom of God so the king in the story represents God and all of us are represented by the servants in the story. And the important point that I would make in preaching from this story is something that may not be obvious to the casual reader today. That is what is the size of the debt we owe to God? What are ten thousand talents?

Well, look at it this way. A worker in that day would earn about one denarii for a day's labor. It took 6,000 denarii to make one talent. So in about 20 years of labor a person would earn one talent. It would take a laborer in those days 200,000 years of work to earn 10,000 talents. If Jesus were here today telling this story to us, he would say that the debt each of us owes God is 200 trillion dollars. It is an incomprehensible amount. So the message in this part of the story is that even though our debt to God is a massive amount so large we never could pay it, God forgives us that debt. God loves us and is merciful and gracious toward each one of us.

Now, Jesus continues the story.

- But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow servant 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. - Matthew 18:28-30

So the servant who has been forgiven so great a debt happens to meet a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii, a significant amount, but not a massive debt. Conceivably the fellow servant could pay off that debt in a year or two. But the servant who has received forgiveness of a massive debt will not be merciful and even allow his fellow servant to pay back the debt he is owed over time. He demands immediate payment. Jesus continues his story.

- When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. - Matthew 18:31

The other servants of the master had recognized the gross injustice that had taken place and reported what has happened to their master.

- Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant 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 also

will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive you brother or sister from your heart. - Matthew 18:32-35

So an angry master calls the ungrateful servant back into his presence and condemns him to what amounts to a lifetime in debtor's prison. Remember it would take 200,000 lifetimes for him to earn enough money to pay the debt.

Now, you ask, "Where is the good news? It sounds like the message in this story is bad news for us. Because when we don't forgive others, which sometimes is very difficult to do, we are condemned. But there is good news when do forgive others.

The good news is that good things happen to us when we forgive other people. Not only are we forgiven, but we also improve our health. So in this sermon I am constructing I would make two very important points.

The first is that when we do not forgive we erect a barrier between ourselves and another person and over time that barrier can grow to the point where reconciliation becomes impossible. Our human relationship with that person is fractured. So if we value the relationships we have with other people we must give and receive forgiveness.

The second point that is good news is that forgiveness is good for our body and our spirit. Anger is a destructive emotion. It eats away at our spirits and clouds over our pleasant nature. We become mean-spirited and disagreeable people who are hard to live with when we harbor anger. More than that harboring anger causes stress in us and this stress over time can be very harmful to our good health, our physical health.

So the good news is that when we forgive we heal the relationships we have with other people and we create beneficial results for our spirits and for our physical health. I would make those points toward the end of the sermon.

Now having pointed out the good news about forgiveness I would look for some illustration that would engrave upon our minds the message in this passage of scripture. Here is that illustration.

In 1983 our daughter Anne went to England for her junior year abroad. At the end of the semester Trudy and I went to England to meet her. One day Anne wanted to take us to see a castle and when I looked at the map I saw that the route to the castle went through the city of Coventry. So I said, "I want to stop to see the cathedral in Coventry." I got some flack. "We have been all through Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Why do you want to take time to see another cathedral?" I didn't say why, I simply said I want to go there. And since I was driving, we went.

We arrived at the cathedral, drove up the entrance way and pulled into the parking area. We got out of the car and began to walk toward the cathedral. And there before us we saw this.

Picture of Coventry Cathedral

Coventry was and perhaps is again an important industrial city. It had a population in 1940 of 238,000 people. On November 14, 1940 over 500 German bombers dropped highly explosive and incendiary bombs on the city. In April, 1941 there was a second raid. In those two raids 4,300 homes were completely destroyed and tens of thousands more homes were damaged. Thankfully, only 1,236 people were killed in the two raids, about 5% of the population. I say thankfully, because many people went to spend the nights in rural areas around Coventry or made it into air raid shelters so the death toll was relatively low. Thousands more were injured.

In the November raid the cathedral was destroyed. When the people of Coventry planned to rebuild their cathedral they decided to build the new cathedral beside the remnants of the old one, and leave the shell that remained of the old cathedral as a "Garden of Remembrance" with the message. "Father Forgive." If the people of Coventry could forgive the devastation brought by German bombers, we should be able to forgive one another. Amen.