

How Often Should I Forgive? (A Sermon for Proper 19A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Forgiveness, for Jesus, is not a quantifiable event. It is a quality; a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than the way of Christ.

If we are to follow Christ then it must become our way as well. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Does that mean the drunk driver? Yes. The cheating spouse? Yes. The lying businessman? Yes. The racist? Yes. The bully? Yes. The abusive parent? Yes. The greedy corporation? Yes. The terrorists of 9/11? Yes. The man who murdered my friends 18 years ago? Yes.

Today we stand at a difficult, seemingly impossible, place. We stand at the intersection of tragedy and today's gospel. We as a community, and many of us as families, are recovering from disaster. This week marked the remembrance of September 11. And 18 years ago this past Friday a man walked into a church in Fort Worth and killed seven of my friends.

The memories, the images, the anger, the fear, and the pain all intersect with Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. Pain and forgiveness. Anger and forgiveness.

Both are real. Both are true. The deeper truth, however, is that we are always standing at this intersection. We stand at that place every day of our life. Look at the history of the world

and you will see the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars, torture, and natural disasters.

Look at our own lives and we'll find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, beneath the wounds, beneath the losses lies the question of forgiveness.

Everyone, I suspect, is in favor of forgiveness, at least in principle. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive."

What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive?

Some will strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let the darkness paralyze them.

I don't say that out of criticism or judgment of someone else but out of my own experience. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness is. Like you I struggle with it and often avoid it. But I also know that none of those answers are the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past, tied to the evil of another, and bereft of the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward.

That does not mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice.

It means we are released from them.

We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves.

Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, as Joseph pointed out in our First Testament reading today.

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are intimately related. That is clear in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is about 3,000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. For the king, it seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is.

This slave, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, it is how we are. In that refusal, the forgiven slave lost sight of his own forgiveness.

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

That's a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, the pain in our nation, and the pain in our own lives is great. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive.

Forgiving those who trespass against us can help begin to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you, but forgiveness creates space for new life.

Forgiveness is an act of hope and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive?

There is no easy road to forgiveness. Don't let anyone tell you, "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." Simplistic trite answers only demean those who suffer and pick at the wound. Forgiving another takes time and work. It is something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven.

We are the beneficiaries of the crucified one. Hanging between two thieves he prayed, "Father, forgive them." That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our workplaces, our parishes, our day to day life.

Forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It wasn't about him. It's about God.

We can only choose to share the forgiveness we have already received from God. Then we chose again, and then again, and then yet again. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we live into.

Sometimes, however, we just can't. The pain is too much, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days we choose to *want* to forgive. Some days we choose to *want to want* to forgive. Then there are those days that all we can do is choose to *want to want to want* to forgive. But we choose, because that's the choice Christ made.

How many times must we choose to forgive? Tell me this. How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of another? How many times have you replayed in your head the argument with another?

That's how many times you choose.

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Amen.