

September 13th 2020 - Sermon

Matthew 18.21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, '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 should 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 should 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.'

Jesus came to teach us the language of love, and the language of love is always the language of forgiveness. Jesus came to teach us that we are called to forgive seventy times seven. In those days this number which to us is rather precise is to be understood as infinity – 70 was a huge number so 70 times 7 is unfathomably huge.

Jesus came to teach us to break our cycles of revenge. Jesus came to teach us to forgive other people, and to forgive ourselves, no matter how painful or difficult that may be.

Why is forgiveness so important? People are imperfect - and the only way to live with imperfect people - is through forgiveness. ... quite simply – without forgiveness life will not be as good – relationships will be problematic and we will be in a cycle of bitterness that makes everything rotten.

In our story today Peter asked Jesus, 'How often should I forgive my brother or sister? Seven times?' Peter thought that he was being rather generous in his question. That is, the morality of the Old Testament and the rabbis who interpreted the Old Testament taught that the maximum forgiveness was three times. Three times and you are out. 'Three strikes and you are out.' So by suggesting that forgiveness was seven times, Peter was being rather generous.

And what was Jesus' response. 'Not seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times.' Infinitely. Limitlessly.

The number 77 or 70 times 7 is a very precise number. This number is found only one other time in the Bible and it is in Genesis 4:24 in the story of Cain, the murderer, and Lamech. Cain gets revenge seven times and Lamech gets revenge 77 times, or 70 times 7.' How often am I to revenge my brother for murder? 'Seventy-seven times.'

In our Christian story - Jesus breaks that cycle of hate and revenge. He turns the old tradition on its head. How many times shall I revenge my brother with one more murder? 77 times?

Jesus teaches that we are not to seek revenge, but to forgive our sisters and brothers 77 times. Our reading today reverses the old ways in Genesis 4:24 – the ways which led to death and destruction.

To illustrate this teaching about our infinite need for forgiveness and our need to infinitely forgive, Jesus told a story about a king whose

servant owed him ten thousand talents. The generous king forgave his servant some ten thousand talents and that same servant then refused to forgive another servant for merely one hundred denarii. Jesus was using humour and exaggeration to make a point. The amount of debt was huge – and couldn't be paid back - the employee whose incredible debt had just been forgiven then refused to forgive the debt of a fellow employee for a really small amount. The employee was willing to receive a huge amount but not to waive the tiny amount owed to him. So the owner of the company, hearing about the stinginess of the first employee, cancelled his original gift. The parable ends with Jesus' statement, 'and so it will be with you if you do not forgive your brother and sister from the heart'.

So what does this mean for us?

First, God's forgiveness is overwhelmingly abundant - the purpose of God's generosity is to inspire us to be forgiving people in all of our relationships. We are to forgive... we are not only inspired to be more forgiving people, but we hear that we are commanded to be forgiving people. There is a threat in this parable, and the threat is not veiled. When you come to the end of the parable, Jesus clearly says, 'And God will not forgive you if you do not forgive your brother and sister from the heart.' The threat from God is clear. This same threat is found in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. We pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Matthew adds at that point, 'For if you do not forgive the trespasses of others neither will God forgive you your trespasses.'

It is ludicrous to ask God's forgiveness when you are unwilling to forgive others.

When people do not let go of their anger, revenge and grievances, - even if these have come about for legitimate reasons – if we cannot let those feelings go we become bitter, and bitterness overwhelms and hardens our hearts – we go rotten.

We treat others as we now feel... the lord's prayer makes so much sense – we have to do to others what we want to happen to us... if we are hard of heart through our hurts and wounds we will radiate hardness to others.

True forgiveness takes great courage. Because when we are wronged – we feel legitimately angry. Forgiveness for me is a process and an attitude - of the heart. When someone wrongs us – we will feel rightly angry – we may feel like acting on our anger – but forgiveness moves from the anger into the process of letting go – it does not stay in the anger otherwise it festers.

I cannot believe in cheap forgiveness or cheap grace. I do not believe that forgiveness is to become an excuse to be a doormat, to let someone walk on your personally. I do not believe it is healthy or good to let someone hurt you and get away with repeatedly doing it and we are simply to tolerate abuse in the name of forgiveness. That is not what Jesus is talking about. We are not to be door mats.

The Greek word for forgiveness is - 'apheiami' - which means 'letting go.' Forgiveness is letting go of the pain inflicted on us so that it no longer eats us up. Forgiveness takes time. The deeper the pain, the longer it takes to heal. But it is brave to forgive. It is often painful and yet it is always liberating. It is good for others and it is good for us.

It sounds easy – but is a major piece of work to forgive – I know this – I really do – but I still work on it and keep working on it. It is something that takes great courage and strength – brave people know how to forgive.

But forgiveness is for big hearted people - like Jesus who on the cross said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

As God forgives us – may we forgive others and forgive ourselves – however hard it is – however long it takes.

Amen.