

Sermon
Trinity 14
13 September 2020

Matthew 18: 21-35

Forgiveness

A prisoner of war was asked, years after his imprisonment, “Have you forgiven your captors yet?” “I will never do that,” he answered.

The other replied: “Then they still have you in prison, don’t they?”

Our Gospel this morning is about forgiveness and the effect of forgiveness, not just on the forgiven, but on the forgiver. It begins with Peter’s question to Jesus regarding how many times to forgive fellow church members. As part of his reply Jesus tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. On the surface it is a straightforward (though rather alarming in its extremes) story about forgiveness and judgement. Beyond this like all parables it is not so neat. It places human forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness and divine punishment. It raises some uncomfortable questions like: Does the parable put a limit on God’s grace and mercy? What does it imply that forgiveness really means, and what does that mean for us? Peter’s questions and Jesus’ reply create a forceful call to forgiveness, in this case within Christian community.

When Peter asks the question, “how many times do I have to forgive?” Jesus says “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Whether it is seventy-seven or seven times seven is not clear in the Greek, but the point is clear. Your forgiveness must be beyond counting. Forgiveness must be absolute. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise.

In the parable, a servant owes his lord a very large amount of money so the lord, reacting harshly, threatens to sell the servant, his wife, and child as payment for the debt. When the slave pleads with him, the Lord shows great mercy and dismisses the entire debt, but only moments later the same servant who has been shown great mercy throttles a fellow slave for owing him a very small amount of money, and has that slave thrown in prison. When his fellow slaves in the community report him, the Lord gives the slave a far worse sentence than before and hands him over to the torturers until he can pay his debt. The parable is one of extremes, but the message is that **the forgiven should forgive others**. There is also a connection being made between the act of human forgiveness and the experience of God’s forgiveness.

Jesus follows the parable with: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” There could well

be some nervousness at the implied limitation on God's mercy here. But a provisional nature of God's forgiveness is articulated throughout Matthew's Gospel – **In Matthew at least, God's forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness.**

We remind ourselves of this every time we say the Lord's prayer

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.”

I don't know about you, but I think this is one of more challenging parts of the prayer. Reminding us of the conditional nature of God's forgiveness. My understanding of it is that **God is a merciful God who will always forgive**, but to truly experience God's forgiveness and mercy, we must also forgive others, and to forgive others we must truly understand God's forgiveness and mercy towards us. It's so easy for us to pass over these lines of the Lord's Prayer as we say them so often, but they have a great depth of meaning on our lives which is worth pausing over. In Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer in Chapter 6 of his Gospel, the prayer petitions God to “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”. The conditional nature is also highlighted at the end of the prayer in the Gospel: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”. We will all be judged by the same God, mostly by whether we show the same grace and forgiveness to others.

And to give that same grace and forgiveness to others, we first have to recognise the magnitude of God's mercy and forgiveness towards us. As Christians we must concern ourselves first with the specks in our own eyes rather than the planks in our neighbours. To truly understand this parable we mustn't place ourselves in the judgement seat of the Lord who forgives, but rather in the hot seat of the unworthy servant who is forgiven.

The parable's judgement, like God's judgment, is a mirror that brings the servant to self-knowledge and repentance. Only when debtors acknowledge the overwhelming weight of their debt can they see the true greatness of God's mercy. Then, those who truly understand the magnitude of God's mercy must **pay it forward** to their debtors and offer that same forgiveness to others. Do unto others as you would have done unto yourself.

To forgive is as important as being forgiven. It has a lasting and healing effect on mind, body and spirit. It is good for us. The medical and scientific world has recognised the importance of forgiveness for our mental health and well-being. Likewise, we know that unforgiveness, or holding on to past hurts and resentments, deeply affects our emotional and physical health. Seeds of bitterness can fester into deep painful wounds.

What happens to us when we forgive? To forgive means to release and let go of something which you have been carrying, sometimes for days, sometimes for a lifetime.

Forgiveness is not denying that something bad has been done to you – that is important to remember. If we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the impact of another person's actions or attitudes on our lives.

Forgiveness doesn't always mean forgetting either. Sometimes we need to remember, as history shows us, in order to try and prevent things happening again. Forgiveness is not about denial.

To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from our judgement, however justified that judgement may be. It is a choice to leave behind resentment, and the desire for them to be punished. Their behaviour remains wrong, but they are released from your need for retribution. It's easy enough for me to stand here and say all this, but this is, of course, sometimes very hard to do. I don't want to simplify or minimize just how challenging it might be. But to forgive frees us and allows us to no longer be a victim of hurt, but a survivor of it. It frees us and in doing it, it allows us to glimpse the magnitude of God's mercy for all of us.

To end this sermon, I offer you an invitation, which is yours to take up if you feel moved to do so. If there is someone you need to forgive, meditate on their name in your heart as you come to the altar to receive communion, and silently offer that name to God. If you are at home watching or reading this, then maybe spend a moment in prayer offering that name to God after you have finished. For some this might be too difficult today, and if so, that's okay, just offer that difficulty up to God and ask for God's help.

I pray this brings you release and a sense of God's peace.
Amen.