

A Talent for Forgiveness

Psalm 86: 1-7, 14-17

Matthew 18:21-35

“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow as I had mercy on you?”

Two medieval monks were walking down a country path. They came to a stream swollen with rain. A young woman was standing there, who could not cross the torrent alone. She asked for their help. Without a word, one monk took her in his arms and carried her across the swollen stream. The second monk followed. When they get to the other side, he put her down, she thanked him and they went their separate ways. But for the next several miles, the second monk berated his companion. “You have broken our rules. You know we are not to talk to women. You know that we are not to touch a woman. You have broken the rules of the order.” On and on, mile after mile he complained about the infraction. Finally, the first monk stopped in his tracks and said “You know, I put that woman down way back by the stream. And I left her there. But you are still carrying her.”

A grudge is a thing we can carry long after it has served any purpose at all. It blocks our view of the present. It keeps us from moving forward. It cuts us off from those around us.

The context for this morning Bible lesson is chapter 18 in the gospel of Matthew. Here Matthew has collected the sayings of Jesus about how Christians are to treat each other; about how they are to get along with each other inside the fellowship (we call it the church). There is a story about going out to look for a stray sheep. We are told how to talk to someone face to face when things are not right. There are sayings about forgiving and letting go.

Having heard all this, Peter would like some clearer guidelines. Peter often speaks for all of us in these stories. “Okay, Jesus. We got it. Forgive our brothers and sisters who hurt us. But how often? How many times? When I was a boy, the rabbi used to say “Forgive three times and you will be like God.” So what are we to do? Five, six, maybe seven times?”

Peter, like us, knows who has hurt him; who has talked bad about him; who has cheated him in a business deal down by the lake. He knows the score. People are good scorekeepers when it comes to what is owed us.

But how good are we at naming the ones we have hurt? What about the times we have cut a deal with some fine print in our direction? Or the time we sold a car to a used car dealer with a blown head gasket and failed to mention it (maybe I should write him a note). We like “caveat emptor” when it suits us, but not when it harms us.

So let’s be clear, Jesus. Forgiveness is good, maybe about seven times? You all know the reply “Not seven, but seventy seven times.” That is more than even we can keep score on. So it means to keep on forgiving.

The Greek word in these lessons for forgiveness is “release,” to let go of. It is to let go and let God. It is to drop the grudge, open the hand that holds the debt, drop the leash that tries to keep someone in line. The opposite is clearly to cling to our injury, as though it were something precious. Instead of letting go, we decide that we are judge, jury and executioner.

There is a bloodthirsty character early in the book of Genesis, back when sin is still taking shape. His name is Lamech. He brags to his wives “I have killed a man for wounding me; a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech is avenged seventy seven times.” Overkill we would call it. This is probably the scene that Jesus is thinking of when he tells Peter, and us, to forgive seventy seven times.

Lamech wants revenge; Jesus wants release. He wants it for us and for those around us. He wants it because revenge and grudges block our path to God; they hold back any sense of community.

Then Jesus tells a parable to drive his point home. I wish he would stop that. These parables are about as subtle as being hit by a bus. They just don’t leave us any wiggle room. We lose our “plausible deniability” after we read one. This is one where Jesus goes for shock value, like throwing a bucket of cold water in our face.

This parable could make the local news. “Man owes a fortune. The king forgives. Man tries to collect some chump change. King gets angry. Details at eleven.”

Jesus seems to think that we owe more than we are owed. He believes that God has been far more gracious to us than we deserve. You will have to decide that for yourself. But this is where the warning comes in. We can erase both sides

of the score sheet at once: what we owe God and what others owe us. Or we can keep both sides intact. It is our choice.

We get fair warning: Remember that we have asked to follow a man who forgave his executioners, his deserters, his betrayers from the cross. So it is no big surprise that he wants us to practice forgiveness with each other, inside the Christian fellowship. He wants us to get good enough at it. That way we can take some of it with us out to the world that so desperately needs to do some releasing; some letting go.

So many of the terrible situations in our world today, from Palestine to Somalia, to Afghanistan, have to do with getting even. You did this last century or 500 years ago; or ten years ago – and we want to get even. It just never works out that way. No one ever evens the score for very long.

Ten years after that terrible day, Sept 11, 2001; ten years later there are people who want to burn the Quran, who want to limit the building of a mosque in the community; who want all the Muslims to go somewhere else. They have decided to take some revenge on a whole group for the actions of a crazed few. And those few, those mass murderers in the planes on 9/11 were acting out a revenge fantasy of their own.

Forgiveness is the opposite of getting revenge. Revenge is death dealing, to us and to our opponents. Forgiveness is life giving to us and to them.

Don and Sally Goodrich's son, Peter, was on board the United Airlines flight 175 that flew into the south tower of the World Trade Center. Peter worked in computers and was on his way to a business trip in California, but his passion at Middlebury College was religion and the study of interfaith dialogue. And he kept the passion alive up until his death at age 33.

In honor of their son, Don and Sally raised the money to build a girl's school in the Logar Province of Afghanistan; a school for 500 girls. And they carried out other community projects like clean water wells, and scholarship for students to study in the US. That gives those students a chance to learn that we are not the enemy. They have a foundation in their son's name that works in the war-torn country with the goal of helping the people of Afghanistan. They seek to foster reconciliation and understanding between Afghanistan and America. It's what Peter would have wanted, they always say.

It is also what Jesus still wants.

God has a talent for forgiveness. The psalmist praises God as the one who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. We are charged here in the fellowship of Jesus to practice this talent. We are to practice it enough that we can then take it out to a world that needs it so desperately. To practice enough that it becomes second nature to find ways to let go and let God. To practice it enough to turn things over to the king who prayed "Father, forgive them."

Dr. Charlie Summers

In a few moments of silence before our hymn, I ask you to write in your bulletin the initials of someone where you are holding a grudge, or they are holding one against you. You do not have to decide now what to do. Simply hold that person up in this place of reconciliation and ask for God's help in the matter.