

Sermon: Trinity 14A St Matthew 18: 21–35

Forgiveness.

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of the living God, Father, son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'll never forgive you! I'll never forgive her! I'll never forgive him! How can I forgive?

Even if you've never said or felt such terrible things I'd be very surprised if you've never even heard them. I must confess that I have, on occasion, not only felt, not only said, but also meant them. When I think of Jesus on the cross looking down on his torturers and saying, "father, forgive them", I'm deeply ashamed.

Forgiveness.

Sometimes so difficult isn't it, but there's no getting away from it this morning! All three of our readings force us to tackle it head on.

In last week's Gospel reading Jesus was giving a detailed strategy for dealing directly with a grievance. No way was he advocating being a doormat but tackling the problem face to face and solving it if at all possible. Peter's question follows on directly from that teaching:

"How often should I forgive? Seven times?" Seven's a measurable number, but Jesus's answer takes forgiveness into a different league altogether.

Let's unpack the parable that illustrates his point. A king's servant owes him 10,000 talents. One talent's about 6,000 denarii (give or take), with each denarius worth a day's wage for a labourer. So the first servant owes the king about 60 million denarii, an amount so large that it's more than the national debt of a small country. No person could repay it, even if they were to sell themselves and their family into servitude for several lifetimes. In an outrageous act of generosity and mercy, the king graciously forgives this totally unforgivable debt.

The second servant owes 100 denarii. It's a decent amount of money, but like the number seven in Peter's question, it's measurable. It's miniscule by comparison to the debt that was forgiven by the king. When the forgiven servant refuses to extend compassion to a fellow servant, no wonder the king gets angry. He's granted his servant a level of forgiveness that exceeds imagination, and yet, that servant is unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another.

Isn't it ironic, that Peter's the one who suggests a low cap on the number of times he should forgive, when he's also the one who will soon need very great forgiveness from Jesus.

Peter's ignorance of his own need is uncomfortable, challenging. Do we always recognize the ways in which we may harm others, either in person or through the systems we're caught up in? Hmm. Food for thought there.

When the first servant refuses to forgive the much smaller debt, the king locks him up to be tortured until he extends forgiveness to his fellow servant. As it appears in a parable, this "torture" is no more literal than is the precise amount of either servant's debt. The parable speaks another truth: the ability to forgive doesn't always come easily, nor is it necessarily a quick or simple process. Some wounds are so deep, that human forgiveness is well nigh impossible.

Yes, Peter's question, "How often should I forgive?" and Jesus's extended answer suggest that forgiveness may well be a long and difficult process. There may be circumstances when we need to seek the help of a trained counsellor or spiritual director in the process of healing.

But even (and especially) when our own efforts fall short, God's mercy is beyond imagining.

Some of you may know that I can vouch for that from my own experience. Some thirty years or more ago, after seventeen years of marriage, my first husband found someone else he wanted to share his life with. I was so filled with anger and bitterness that I felt I would never ever be able to forgive.

This troubled me deeply as you can imagine. Every time I read this Gospel passage or heard it preached on, every time I said the Lord's prayer- -forgive us as we forgive- -every time I read 1 Corinthians 13..Love never fails- -I felt a complete failure. I was a mess. One day a dear friend suggested going for a few days to Lee Abbey, a Christian holiday centre that some of you may know, on the lovely North Devon coast. They usually have some kind of programme going on but you can just go for a relaxing time by the sea and I thought that was what we were going to do. However, believe it or not, that week they were running a workshop on- - forgiveness! I couldn't resist going and when we were invited to seek counsel for any personal issues raised by the talk, I went and told my problem. The counsellor asked if I actually wanted to forgive. Being honest, I said I didn't want to- - but - -I wanted to want to- -I really wanted to want to!

"That's good enough for God", she said. "Now please stop torturing yourself and let him work. I don't know what he'll do or when, but he will act in his own good time". She prayed a simple prayer for me and then asked me to find a big stone and take it to Jenny's leap—a spectacular place on the edge of a cliff. I was to let the stone represent all the pent up rage and bitterness inside me, offer it in prayer to God, throw it into the sea and then leave the whole business in God's hands. It was raining and as the stone hit the waves, my tears mingled with the raindrops. I felt washed clean from my sin of unforgiveness and willing to leave it in God's hands. Whenever the business crept into my mind again I would push it away, no longer allowing myself to dwell on it. About three months later I saw the other woman in the town centre. Instead of feeling the usual bitterness rising up to choke me and just rushing past, I found myself saying, "Hello, "quite normally as I went peacefully by. Then I suddenly had a mad urge to rush along Marlowes shouting, "It's a miracle. God's done it!" I managed to restrain myself until I got home, but the healing process was gently under way.

Many surprising things have happened since then over the years, including the death of my first husband and his bereaved wife generously inviting me to share in the interment of his ashes. We've had some wonderful healing conversations.

Yes, forgiveness can be hard, really hard. But the good news is that God gives us, in Christ, his gift of forgiveness and helps us to share that gift with others.

And in so doing, God opens doors that are shut. God opens a future that is shut. By forgiving those who have sinned against us, we don't allow the past to dictate our future. Forgiveness breaks the chains of anger and bitterness and frees us to live new lives.

On the night when Judas will betray him and Peter and the other disciples will abandon him, at supper Jesus announces to all, "This is the blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins; do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me". As Ruth drinks the cup on our behalf and we receive the body of Christ this morning, whatever burdens we are carrying can be laid once again at the cross. If you need help, as I did, to forgive, seek help and don't feel guilty. Rest assured His love and compassion and forgiveness for each one of us will never ever fail.

Amen

Carole Lewis