

Proper 19 (A)
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Matthew 18:21-35
LCW, Raynham, Ma.

“Then Peter said, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”

Father in Heaven! Hold not up our sins against us, but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of thee when it wakens in our soul and each time it wakens – should not remind us of what we have committed but of what Thou didst forgive; not of how we went astray but of how Thou didst save us! Amen. (Kierkegaard)

Introduction

The story is told of a Quaker dairy farmer, who possessed a particularly orn’ry cow ... where, no matter what the farmer did, every time it came time to milking the cow, it was inevitable the cow would kick over its bucket of milk.

Well, one morning, the Quaker had had about enough. But not being prone to violence he simply grabbed the cow by the ears, pulled the cow’s face nose to nose and eye to eye, and said: “I shall not curse thee, nor shall I strike thee, nor shall I makest of thee a sirloin steak. But if thou kickest over one more bucket of milk, I shall surely and most certainly sell thee to a Lutheran.”

Of course, the business of “*unforgiveness*” is not particular to one denomination or another. Nor the fact that we – as Lutherans – are, at times, just as prone to “shoot our wounded” than save them. But whoever originally told that joke had in his/her experience, that if you want to be forgiven for something, a Lutheran *might not* be your best bet.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this should not be! Yes, God forbid that such a thing might be said about *this* people, or *any* who bear the name of Jesus Christ. Where many all who have ears to hear this morning’s Gospel reading walk away with the desire for what must seem a most unnatural act to us – to forgive another. Let each of us revel in the joy that, in Christ, we stand on the other side of His 70 x 7 equation. But, just as joyfully, let this people rejoice to live out that forgiveness ... without limit, without price!

FORGIVE ONLY AS OFTEN AS GOD FORGIVES YOU. FORGIVE ONLY WITH A FORGIVENESS
THAT GOD *still* GIVES TO YOU IN JESUS’ NAME.

Amen.

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Forgiveness is “the most costly thing in the world” (Barclay) ... wherein, Jesus spends the whole of the 18th chapter of Matthew encouraging it within His disciples. Prompted by a discussion as to “*who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,*” Jesus launches into a lengthy discourse on the oft-messy business of forgiveness ... forgiveness that *always* deals with the offense, and, in the end, stands as a gift that keeps on giving.

“*Treat [an unrepentant person] as you would a pagan or a tax collector,*” Jesus said. How did He do that? He loved them ... even to death! Yes, Jesus goes to the grave with their – and every sinner’s name – on His lips. Whose death and resurrection bids us “Do whatever it takes ... to bring them home rejoicing ... Do whatever you must do to bring them home to God.”

But as Chuck Swindoll has aptly noted that, while, “a required course, in the curriculum of servanthood, forgiveness’ exams are often tough to pass.” Where, sensing that something is amiss, Peter asks “*How much?*” Beset by the largesse of heaven’s grace, he’s saying, “Forgiveness without limits. Certainly there must be a point at which it must run out.”¹ After all, it is nature’s law isn’t it? “YOU’RE OUT!” the umpire shouts. “Oh, I’ll forgive ... but I cannot forget!” we say. “I can forgive that ... but not *that.*” (Paavola) Freud’s way is the world’s way: “One must forgive one’s enemies, but not before they have been hanged.”

Admittedly, forgiveness *is* unnatural. After all, it *is* a matter of condition isn’t it? To which Jesus answers, “*I tell you, not 7 times (Peter), not 7 times church, not 7 times children, husbands, wives, and so on ... but 70 x 7 times* (i.e. “never give up on anyone”).² But How? Why?

1. WE FORGIVE AS THE LORD FIRST FORGAVE US!

¹ For rabbis in Jesus’ day, it was 3 times! “For three transgressions ... and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” (Amos 1:3,6,9,11; 2:1,4,6) Where, “behind this question there is the assumption that there is a limit to one’s forgiveness and that the determining factor is how often *I* should forgive *him.*” (Paavola)

² CALVIN: contra “*Lamech, boasting of revenge by killing a man says, ‘If Cain is avenged 7 times, then Lamech 77 times.’*” (Genesis 4:24) But more like Jesus: “*If your brother sins against you 7 times in a day and 7 times he returns to you saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.*” (Luke 17:4)

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven (that is, God’s gracious reigns and rule in the hearts and lives of His disciples) is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 talents (millions of dollars) was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.” “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient (lit. “hold back your anger for a while”) with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything’ (he doesn’t ask for forgiveness, but only to retain his own power in making good on the debt³).’ The servant’s master took pity (with a deep feeling of compassion, heartfelt for one in trouble – often used of Jesus’ compassion on the crowds and God for sinners!) on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.”

This is a parable of extremes ... the enormity of a debt ... and a king’s exaggerated willingness to forgive it. What is it that the Lord wants us to walk away with today?

First, that sin and its consequences are titanic. Yes, all we need do is look around at the brokenness that comes with un-forgiveness: be it between individuals, a family, a church, or a nation. Where, it is an all-out Chapter 11 bankruptcy of the soul, each of coming up short.

BUT “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom!” (Bruner, *Matthew*, 658) Where the one who throws him/herself on the mercy of the court gets infinitely more than he or she deserves. Where, for no other reason than His unmerited kindness and mercy, our God cancels the debt. He graciously has canceled the debt!

Wherein, to be sure, such forgiveness is not easy. It’s never easy.

“If it is possible,” Jesus said ... realizing with the drops of bloody sweat falling from His forehead, there was no other way. Where, in one final agonizing cry, forgiveness rains down upon the soldiers, upon the religious leaders of the day, upon the disciples hiding in the shadows, upon you and me ... *“Father, forgive ... forgive!”*

Why? All to get us back ... all to restore the ones whom He loved, to break the cycle of pain and guilt, to demonstrate the lengths to which He still goes to seek us out and literally to love us *back* into the kingdom of God. O the depths of the richness of God!

We forgive only as our heavenly Father forgives us. And He does, child of God. He does! Where, in the second place ...

³ Kolb, *CJ*, 22:3, 321

2. WE FORGIVE SO AS TO LOOSEN THE STRANGLEHOLD OF ANGST AND GRIEF THAT SO OFTEN HAS ITS GRIP ON US. ⁴

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii (chump change). He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. ‘His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ ‘But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.’”

We most likely cringe at the absurdity in Act II of Jesus’ parable, of how this forgiven one in turn now goes out and exacts revenge on someone else. If you’re like me, you’re probably thinking “Me? I’d never do that!”

But any who say, “Oh, I’ll forgive ... but I’ll never forget!” ... or, any who say, “I can forgive that ... but just not *that*” (Paavola) ... or any who say, “Enough is enough,” have done just that!

Like the little boy who had a fight with his brother. Where, as the day passed, he refused to speak to him. But at bedtime, their mother said, “Don’t you think you should forgive your brother before you go to sleep? The Bible says, ‘do not let the sun go down on your anger.’”

Where, after some perplexed reflection, the boy replied, “Is there any way I can keep the sun from going down.” (Herb Miller, *Actions Speak Louder than Verbs*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)

Yes, Lord, just a little more time to hold the grudge ... a little more time to exact revenge ... a little more time to allow that hurt to fester, crippling my love for God and the appreciation of His gifts for us? Aren’t our relationships worth more than that? Aren’t our friendships worth the risk of forgiveness? For the sake of the kingdom? For the sake of love?

Where, with the beginning of forgiveness being our forgiveness from Christ, we’re now in the middle, having received, and now ready to give. Only then, is the idolatry of sin and selfishness broken ... allowing *forgiven* sin to become the gift that fills us. Leading us thirdly ...

3. WE FORGIVE AS IT’S THE ONLY WAY TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF BLAME AND HURT IN A RELATIONSHIP.

⁴ The failure to forgive is really a form of idolatry (see Joseph’s forgiving of his brothers on the basis of “Am I in the place of God?”) ... of thinking that we ourselves know better than God Himself. It is also idolatry in the sense that we allow someone, or something else to hold sway over our emotions, consciousness, and even decision making. (Kolb)

*“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed (saddened) and went and told their master everything that had happened. **Then the master called the servant in.** ‘You wicked servant,’ he **said,** ‘I canceled all the debt of yours because you begged me to. **Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’** In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured (often so that the debtor would reveal “all” his sources of income, buried treasure, etc. – or to have his friends or family pay the debt⁵), until he should pay back all he owed. **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”**”*

To be sure, the parable ends on a hard word. But what is the alternative to what our Lord asks of us? To carry around the weight of hurt, bitterness and pain for the rest of our lives? To drink the poison of bitterness ourselves in hopes that the other person dies. “Let us not thrust the sword into ourselves by being revengeful ...” (Chrysostom) Surely, forgiveness is Jesus’ way of thwarting what would otherwise be a slow/painful death to a relationship with others, ourselves, or ultimately with heaven itself.

Where, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s book *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a marriage disintegrates all because the wife one day forgot to replace a bar of soap. Where, out of giving the gaffe continual thought and life, their life was reduced to sleeping in separate rooms, eating their meals in silence.

“Even when they were old and placid,” writes Marquez, “They were very careful about brining it up, for the barely healed wounds could begin to bleed again as if they had been inflicted only yesterday.”⁶

How can a bar of soap ruin a marriage? How can anything so petty drive two people apart on the playground, in the office, in the home, in a church?⁷ Because neither could bring themselves to ask, “Forgive me.” Neither would be the first to forgive *“70 x 7.”*

⁵ Trench

⁶ For another potential illustration see my sermon on the OT reading for this Sunday (Gen 50:15-21). Ref. the story of the story of the stately oak, devastated by Union canon during the Civil War, which, Lee encourages a certain Kentucky woman to just cut it down, so as to remind her no longer of what was lost – all but the hate she still holds in her heart every time she looks at the now deformed tree.

Child of God, in Jesus' name, be the first to forgive! (1) As God in Christ has forgiven you; (2) To loose the grip that the idolatry of unforgiveness strives to have on you; and (3) In order to break the cycle. Someone must be first. Christ was, is! "Forgiving is hard. So was the cross: hard words, hard wood, hard nails." (Stoddard)

Conclusion

"You're in incredibly fine condition," the doctor concluded after finishing thorough physical. "How old did you say you were, sir?"

"Seventy-seven."

"Seventy-seven! Why, you have the health of a sixty-year-old. What's your secret?"

"I guess, Doc, it's due to a pact the wife and I made when we got married. She promised that if she was ever about to lose her temper, she'd stay in the kitchen 'till she cooled off. And I pledged that when I got angry I'd keep quiet, too, and go outside until I calmed down."

"I don't understand," said the doctor, "How could that help you stay so fit?"

"Well," the patient explained, "it's like this, doc. I guess you could say I've lived an outdoor life."

From the beginning, forgiveness of sins has been the Church's song ... resounding to heaven itself. Where, there was a God who once left heaven, to bring His lost ones home, and heaven's angels rejoiced! Inspire heaven to rejoice again and again ... not because someone came begging for mercy, but because long before that, we first went to them.

FORGIVE ONLY AS OFTEN AS GOD FORGIVES YOU. FORGIVE ONLY WITH A FORGIVENESS THAT GOD *still* GIVES TO YOU IN JESUS' NAME.

Amen!

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⁷ "The problem with the church today is not corruption. It is not institutionalism. No, the problem is far more serious than something like the minister running away with the organist. The problem is pettiness. Blatant pettiness."—Mike Yaconelli, *The Wittenburg Door*

[Friday E-Mail:] So, let's get one thing straight from the start: For Jesus' disciples, forgiveness is not an option. It is a required course, whose exams are often difficult to pass. Where, each reading for Sunday tries to get at this solemn/freeing, truth.

In **Genesis 50:15-21**, Joseph comes to forgive his brothers, even though they had sold him into slavery. In **Romans 14:1-12**, Paul urges us not to quarrel over opinions about earthly matters, but to honor the Lord in all we do, where, in so doing, we come to honor each other as well. Then, to drive the point home, in **Matthew 18:21-35**, Jesus instructs His disciples that forgiveness received leads to forgiveness given. Wherein, living as Christ's redeemed children, we possess a power that transcends anything in this world – namely, our own sin removed *“as far as the east is from the west.”* Whereby, embraced by two scarred hands, we now embrace one another. Forgiven, we are given the power and the means to forgive.

But man, it's hard. Like a woman I once knew. Somewhere in the relationship with her son, she perceived a wrong had been done to her. She responded with some hurtful words. And that was it! She never talked to him again. Where, visiting her on occasion, I would ask, “Why don't you just call or write him? It can't hurt.” To my knowledge, it was a phone call never made ... a letter never sent.

It is to these types of situations that Jesus relates the parable I'll be preaching on this Sunday, spoken by Jesus on the heels of Peter's inquiry about the number of times one should forgive another. Peter, of course, is being generous – even by the prevailing standards of his day: three times was plenty enough. Seven? Off the charts! But pointing Peter and the Church to the limitless/Calvary love of God, Jesus says, “70x7”! Ludicrous. Impossible. Totally extravagant.

Until one thinks of the alternative ... not the judgment part, for those who ultimately refuse to forgive, but before that. Where the anger, rage, bitterness and strife comes to dwell in one's soul, one's body, one's relationships, where forgiveness is withheld, stuffed in, or, God-forbid, expressed to the detriment of others.

Where God, you see, is not bound as much by numbers, as to the pledge He once made to this planet – to forgive *our* sins, no matter how many times we fall and came crawling back to Him. Calvary's cross shows us this. Indeed, it is the only “repayment plan” that's adequate so the floodgates of heaven can be opened. In the shadow of the cross, all barriers come down, so that forgiveness can reign.

“Father in Heaven!” Soren Kierkegaard once prayed: *“Hold not our sins up against us, but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of Thee – when it awakens in our soul and each time it awakens – should not remind us of what we have committed but of what Thou didst forgive; not of how we went astray but of how thou didst save us!”* Such a prayer might not only save us, but others! SYOS