

Sermon Sunday September 17 2023

We heard from Jesus last week about how to manage our relationships when we feel someone has done harm to us and hurt us. The wisdom Jesus shared is practical and reflects our struggles as human beings to live in peace with one another. Of course, in the present time it seems like those struggles have reached epic proportions. Everything is fodder for an argument or a war these days, particularly on social media. But even in ancient times, it was so.

And so, when Jesus gives us this plan, one that is designed to offer a chance for rebuilding a relationship with honest and civil conversation, it is no surprise that Peter wants to test the limits. “How many times must I forgive someone, Lord?” The parenthetical subtext is “...because this person is still treating me badly and I’m this far a way from smacking him.”

Jesus’ plan for reconciliation is, of course, four steps with incrementally stronger addressing of the offender.

Four, Peter can manage. But he wants to know if the problem exceeds that number four, how long does he have to do this little dance? Surely there is a point where Peter can go ahead and smack the offender, right? Peter suggests seven as the magic number of times he is supposed to forgive.

Alas, no.

Jesus says, “not seven times, but seventy seven times.”

Sometimes that phrase is translated seventy times seven, or 490. That’s a radical number, that 490. For that matter, seventy-seven is pretty hard to wrap one’s mind around. And Jesus sees the shock on the faces of his disciples, most of whom are not higher-level mathematicians, and decides they need a parable, a story, to understand what he expects of them.

The story is a simple one. There's a king. He's a king of a large and wealthy country. He's got a slave who serves as his administrator, sort of a Chief Financial Officer. For whatever reason, this CFO guy has run up an enormous debt. Ten thousand talents. A talent is the largest monetary unit in that time, the equivalent of 6000 denarii. A single denarius is the equivalent of a day's pay for a laborer. And this fellow owes 60 million denarii.

Mind blown. It's an astounding number. We don't know how he racked up this debt to his boss the king. When the king decides to do a little audit of the books, he's angered, no, enraged, by the fact that this fellow owes him so much, and wants to sell him, his family members, and his possessions to begin to repay the debt.

All the fellow can do is to beg for time, so he might repay the debt. How he expects to do it is not explained, but something about how he asks touches the king's heart. And so the king not only rescinds the punishment he has ordered, he actually forgives the debt! In full!

It is the most radical kind of forgiveness, isn't it? Sixty million denarii. The most extravagant of mercies, to forgive this debt.

And you'd think that this man who has been given this amazing gift of mercy would be grateful for something he didn't deserve.

But he forgets quickly how it feels to be in debt with no path to repayment. Another slave, someone lower in the social strata, owes this forgiven one a pittance: 100 denarii. He asks for some forbearance. He wants to pay it back, but he just needs a little more time. The forgiven one not only grabs him by the throat, he throws him into jail until the debt is repaid. Compassion has been denied, mercy has not been given.

Among the other slaves, many of whom may owe money to this man who treated their compatriot so mercilessly, there are rumblings. This isn't fair. And so they complain to the king and tell the story of how the fellow who owed 100 denarii was mistreated. They're whistleblowers, to use a more modern term.

And the king is horrified by what he hears. He showed this fellow such extravagant forgiveness, such mercy, and then the man turns around and treats someone with an utter lack of mercy.

Enraged, the king exacts justice on the man. He throws the fellow into jail, where he is to be tortured until the debt is paid.

Think of the path of this parable: mercy given by the king, mercy denied by the one who received the king's mercy. Complaint of those who witness the injustice, consequences for the one who refused to give his debtor the same thing his king had given him.

The one who received mercy doesn't understand that he needs to pay it forward. Mercy shown to him is something he should emulate, not just be appreciative of what the king has done for him. It's not transactional.

Note, if you will, that this parable addresses the question we ask over and over again when we are told we must forgive: what about justice?

If someone has done me harm, if I forgive does that mean the person who harms gets off scot-free? No. There are consequences. Justice is important.

The delicate balance point between justice and mercy is a hard point to find, but we must hope for accountability. What does this look like?

Perhaps the most powerful and instructive model is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, guided by Bishop Desmond Tutu. Reconciliation entails both the offer of forgiveness and the naming and acceptance of responsibility for wrongful, wounding conduct. This approach to mercy and justice is precisely what Jesus talks about in all of Matthew 18: while the faith community prioritizes grace and mercy, it also holds its members accountable for what they do to others.

Remember how often Jesus tells people whom he has healed, or who have found a new way of life through baptism, "Go and sin no more!" That is why, in Jesus' instruction manual last week, he talks about the offender acknowledging his bad behavior. Part of this work is for people who have done bad things to admit to their own behavior. Forgiveness can happen without this, as a desire to release the pain of what happened, but for true reconciliation to occur, there needs to be a recognition that we are accountable to the community and to God.

That's hard, and I know that. But there is something healing for both sides when each admits to what they said or did that contributed to the conflict.

And so I beg of you: if you did or said anything to another member of this community that was hurtful, you have a sacred responsibility to stop trying to justify your own harmful actions and to simply say "I did or said those things, and they were hurtful. I am sorry. What can I do to make things better?" And if you're still saying or doing things that harm the Body of Christ in this congregation, you've got some serious work to do. Start with admitting your behavior was wrong, and then amend your ways. Not because I said so. Not because you're willing to lose an argument now and again for peace in the family. But because there will always be something that will tempt you to say those sorts of harmful words again, and we will be stuck in a cycle of hurting each other that gets in the way of being all that God has made us to be. It has to stop. God forgives, your brothers and sisters in Christ forgive as well. In this parable, Jesus tells us "pay mercy and compassion forward." It's not about doing something because you're afraid that God will zap you with a cosmic laser. You do it because God has already forgiven you and you want to model your behavior after that.

And so we pray:

Teach us how to love each other even across our differences. Teach us how to disagree without belittling or bellowing. Teach us how to find a path to healing when we fall short. Teach us because you showed us how to do this, through Jesus Christ your only Son. And teach us to stop and think before we say something that will wound. Guide us and heal us, we pray. Amen.