

Matthew 18:21-35

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Preached for the Southeastern Synod Website, Pastor Karen Boda

I'm Pastor Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life. I bring your greetings from Bishop Strickland and all the synod staff on this Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Our gospel reading is from the 18th chapter of Matthew, beginning at the twenty first verse.

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Here ends the reading.

When I first read the text for this week I did a silent groan. It's the "F" text. The forgiveness text. It's not my favorite and to be honest, I'd rather not preach on it.

We know it by heart. Unlike some of Jesus' parables, this one isn't hard to understand. Peter asks Jesus just how many times he is expected to forgive. He wants a formula. The rabbis have traditionally been expected to forgive three times and Peter offers up seven. Which is rather generous. But Jesus says we've got to forgive not just three times. Or even seven times. No. Jesus asks us to forgive 7x70 times. Beyond what we can count. Beyond our capacity to even remember.

For those of us who have trouble giving someone a second chance, a seventh chance or more chances than we can remember seems ridiculous. Impossible. This text must not apply to me. Amen.

Rev. Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life, ELCA Southeastern Synod
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Ugh. Okay. We'll try to work through this and see if there is indeed something Jesus is telling us today.

I stumbled across something this week called *The Forgiveness Project*.¹ It was founded back in 2004 by a journalist who wanted desperately to report on something other than conflict, violence, and crime. She wanted to report on people who have rebuilt their lives following being hurt or experiencing trauma. She wanted to talk about the resilience of the human spirit and serve an antidote to the narratives of hate. She wanted to talk about hope and empathy and understanding.

She's built a huge website filled with stories. Both children and adults tell the stories. Famous people and those you've never heard of. Rich and poor. All races and genders and ethnicities and religions. Each story is different. There are long stories and short ones. Individual and communal stories. Stories from long ago and some very recent. Some stories show immediate forgiveness and in others forgiveness has taken decades.

Each story tells the power of forgiveness and the ability of forgiveness to change lives. Most of us know that forgiveness can improve our health; reducing blood pressure, releasing anger, anxiety, and stress. It can change our attitude towards life, increasing our hope and compassion. For communities, the impact of forgiveness can be enormous. Forgiveness and reconciliation is often the first step toward building and maintaining peace in a community, reunited divided communities.

In our text today, Peter asks Jesus for a forgiveness formula. He wants to know what is expected of him. Don't we all want to know "how" to forgive? The classic who, what, when, where, and why?

But as we hear one forgiveness story after another, it's really clear that there are no rules or timeframes set upon forgiveness. There is no "right" way to forgive. There is no formula. Forgiveness is a journey. A lifelong journey with no shortcuts.

Forgiveness is also really hard. Looking at my own life, I know that forgiveness is hard. I struggle to forgive the daily things – the harsh words launched at me in an email or text. The family member who, one more time, didn't clean up the kitchen. The friend who forgot my birthday. I'm the one who's right. I'm the one who has been wronged. Why should I have to forgive? So I let these simmer. Ferment. Marinate even. Often until a relationship is broken. A friendship strained. I find these personal, daily opportunities for forgiveness to be so hard, if not at times impossible.

The need for forgiveness goes way beyond our daily lives, though, and into our communities. We just need to crack open a news source to see a story about an abusive spouse or parent. A company which cheats the employees out of their retirement. The continued destruction of our planet. Protests and riots raging in our cities. The systemic impact of the pandemic on our

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>

African American communities. The harsh rhetoric and divisive tactics used in this presidential election.

Can there be forgiveness in these times? Can there be reconciliation?

I want to be very clear on one thing. This text has been misused and abused more times than we can count. Eric Barreto² says that “Forgiveness does not mean that we embrace the violence perpetrated against us. It does not mean giving free reign to those who have done us and would do us harm. It does not mean a ready submission to those who are stronger than us.”

Forgiveness is not discounting or minimizing or accepting the wrong. Forgiveness is not letting others take advantage of us or making the wrong go away. Instead forgiveness is a way to “live within the hurt, without being held captive by it.”³ British philosopher and poet David Whyte⁴ has written that forgiveness is an act of compassion rather than one of simple forgetting. But forgiveness is hard. Seriously hard.

In our parable, the king forgave the servant’s debt. This servant owed the king 150 years of income. That’s more money than most of us can imagine. A huge amount of money. Even after being forgiven this HUGE debt, the servant still couldn’t bring himself to forgive the much much smaller debt owed to him.

The king’s forgiveness, I agree, was absurd. No one forgives a debt like that. It was illogical. Undeserved. It didn’t make any sense. Besides. I can’t do that. I can’t forgive like the king. I can’t forgive seven times seventy, which is one of the reasons that I don’t like this parable. If I’m honest with myself, I am like the servant. I struggle to forgive.

It is in this recognition of our own struggle that we begin to understand the true meaning of this parable. This parable is not only law. It’s not only about me needing to forgive others. It is also through this parable that I realize that Jesus didn’t count the number of times Peter messed up. Peter asked questions. Peter denied him. Instead, Jesus died on a cross for him - for us. Died so that all our sins are forgiven. All of them.

This parable is so filled with grace. Grace by which I can understand that I too need to be forgiven. Not once. Three times. Or seven times. I need to be forgiven seven times seventy. This parable tells me that I *will* experience the abundance and enormity of God’s absurd grace and forgiveness over and over and over again. So many times, that God will lose count. Forgiveness is letting God heal us. Forgiveness is a gift of grace.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2165

³ https://theforgivenessproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Forgiveness-Project_Tool-Box_Ch.-28_Forgiveness-and-Reconciliation.pdf

⁴ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/05/15/david-whyte-consolations-anger-forgiveness-maturity/#:~:text=In%20a%20related%20meditation%2C%20Whyte%20considers%20the%20nature%20of%20forgiveness%3A&text=Stranger%20still%2C%20it%20is%20that,than%20one%20of%20simple%20forgetting.>

Each time we gather as a community we open with our confession, telling God that we have been captive to sin and we cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against God. Against others. Sinned by what we've done and what we haven't done. We seek forgiveness.

Each time we say the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive our sins, our debts, our trespasses. Each time we receive communion, we come together in community, hands open, asking to be nourished and strengthened with the bread and the wine. We need the strength to accept God's forgiveness and forgive those who sin against us. It is in this community where we will also find additional strength and support.

Note that we don't confess just once in our lives. We don't commune once and we're good. We don't learn the Lord's Prayer and then say it only once. Forgiveness is not a formula. Instead, our life with Christ is a journey. The path to forgiveness is a journey. We can't do it on our own and we don't have to.

Reflect on the words of the absolution today. Feel the presence and the power of God in these words. In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake, God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sin.

The abundant and power of God's forgiveness is given to you. Accept it and let God's forgiveness transform your life. Let God's forgiveness free you, so that you too can free others.

Amen.