

15 Pentecost, Proper 19, Yr. A

September 13, 2020

Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

We're hearing again from that section of Matthew that has to do with relationships within the Christian community. The point he's trying to make is that the life of the community, the family of God, is the most important thing. If you're called to be a member of the community, you're also called to do everything in your power to nourish and strengthen the community's bonds of love. Paul is addressing those same concerns in this section of the letter to the Romans.

Last week we heard Matthew's advice about what to do when one member sinned against another. It was about reconciliation, about getting the person back into the community. This week it's about forgiveness. In the rabbinic tradition, you were obligated to forgive someone three times, so, when Peter suggests that one forgive seven times, he undoubtedly thinks he's way over the top, and I'm sure he's astounded when Jesus says, "no, not 7 times, try 77 times!" And he illustrates his point with the parable of the unforgiving servant.

In the story, the first servant owes an amount that is so high as to be impossible to repay. 10,000 talents is said to be about 15 years of wages. Someone calculated that if you took 8600 people, each carrying

a 60 pound bag of money, and put them in a line, it would stretch for 5 miles. By contrast, the second servant owes only 100 denarii, which is about one day's wages – an amount that could easily fit into your pocket. Given that, it would be obvious to Jesus' listeners that the first servant would NEVER be able to repay the amount he owed. But when the servant begs for patience and says he'll repay everything, the king, out of pity for him, forgave the entire amount. So when the first servant turns around and refuses to forgive the infinitesimal amount owed to him by the second, the text says that his fellow slaves were greatly distressed. So, the question for us: how was it possible that the first servant completely missed the significance of what he'd received from the king? Some commentators think that maybe he thought he'd outsmarted the king and convinced him that repayment was a real possibility. All he seems to know was that he was on the hook and now he's off. And because he misunderstood what had happened, because he failed to see the gift he had been given, he refuses to extend any grace to his fellow servant and, in the end, loses the gift that he had received.

I think the message for us is pretty straightforward; we've been given the gifts of life and grace and forgiveness by God and we need to extend those same gifts to everyone else – no exceptions. But, like that first servant, we often miss both the fact that God

has given us everything AND that God has forgiven us everything.

We don't talk a lot about forgiveness these days, probably because we don't talk that much about sin. And if we do think about sin, I think we're tempted to think that we're pretty much OK. Maybe a misstep here and there, but none of the big stuff. We aren't out robbing banks or abusing children or cheating on our spouses. But sin is more than that. If we acknowledge the fact that God's original intent in creation was harmony, peace and friendship and then look at behaviors that instead create alienation, disharmony, conflict, hatred and hostility, we have a better handle on the idea of sin. One author in a book about sin, puts it this way:

“Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly and – a little deeper perhaps – the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, or pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove you can. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of doing

whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, no other god to follow. For ages and ages, this experience has been called sin – deadly alienation from the source of life.... It is a name for the experience of being cut off from air, light, sustenance, community, hope, meaning, life.

*(Speaking of Sin, Barbara Brown Taylor)*

That way of looking at sin, preferring darkness to light, refusing love, refusing responsibility, retarding growth – allows each of us to recognize how we, too, sin, and how we, too, need forgiveness, over and over again. And, of course, the point of the parable is to give us a chance to see that, in order to give us a chance to extend the grace of forgiveness that we have received to others.

Forgiveness. We all need it. But it also bears a closer look at what forgiveness is and what it isn't.

First of all, there's a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation was the subject of last week's reading, and it has to be bilateral – both parties have to be involved. But forgiveness can be one-sided. You can forgive someone without their participation – they don't have to acknowledge that they did anything wrong, they don't even have to accept your forgiveness. It doesn't matter, you can still forgive them. We're close to the anniversary of 9/11 and I remember one of the priests who was at

the site said that forgiveness is about doing what you can to end the cycle of violence, retribution and revenge. We still stand in awe, he said, of the horrors that can happen to people and that people can perpetrate, but we have the option to say that we aren't going to participate in or repay those behaviors. Remember that on the cross, Jesus didn't say, "an eye for an eye," urging his followers to revenge. Rather he said, "Forgive them, Father." The cycle ends here.

Another thing about forgiveness. It's not denial or indifference to the wrong that was done. It doesn't excuse the harm, it doesn't mean that we can't defend ourselves from future hurtful behavior. It just means that we take stock of what's happened, we grieve our losses and we decide to respond with forgiveness and compassion.

I would also note that it's not forgetting although the two of them are often linked. When doing divorce law, there were occasions when there was abusive behavior toward a spouse or toward the children. It would be a travesty to say that forgiveness required the kind of forgetting that would put spouse and children back into those dangerous and abusive situations.

WHY then should we forgive? First of all, because of all that God has forgiven us and then because God forgives and our work is to put on the mind of God.

But there are other reasons as well. Studies have been done that show that the one who forgives receives not only those spiritual benefits, but physical and mental benefits as well. Forgiving lowers blood pressure, releases anxiety, anger and stress. Holding a grudge, the researchers say, is bad for your health. I once heard someone say that holding a grudge, living in resentment, is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. In fact, the Greek word “to forgive,” means to “release from one’s grasp”. To set free; to let go. The studies found that when people forgave someone, there was always a physical sense of relief, a feeling of a weight being lifted. In letting go through forgiveness, they set themselves free.

One final word about forgiveness: it’s not easy. In fact, sometimes the best we can do is to pray for the grace to be able to forgive. And sometimes even a step further back – pray for the grace to be able to pray for the grace to forgive. Here’s a story about this.

It seems there was an old deacon who always prayed, LORD, PROP US UP ON OUR LEANIN’ SIDE. After hearing that prayer for a long time, someone asked him what he meant by it. He said:

Well, you see, it’s like this. I got an old barn our back. It’s been there a long time, it’s withstood a lot of weather, it’s gone through a lot of storms and it’s

stood for many years. It's still standing. But one day I noticed it was leaning to one side a bit. So I went and got some pine poles and propped it up on its leaning side so it wouldn't fall. Then I got to thinking about that and about how much I was like that old barn. I've been around a long time; I've withstood a lot of life's storms. I've withstood a lot of bad weather in life. And I'm still here, so I like to ask the Lord to prop us up on our leaning side, 'cause I figure a lot of us get to leaning at times. Sometimes we get to leaning toward anger, leaning toward bitterness, leaning toward hatred, toward cussin', toward a lot of things we shouldn't. So we need to pray, "Lord, prop us up on our leaning side, so we will stand straight and tall again, to glorify the Lord."

Amen.