



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

Forgive as you have been forgiven

Sermon for Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020 (15th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 19A, Track 2)

Mtr. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Last week, we heard Jesus's instructions about how to deal with someone who sins against you. He ends by saying that if the person won't listen to you or to a third party you bring with you or to the church, "treat them as you would a Gentile and a tax collector."

Although some have taken that sentence to mean, "cast them out" or "shun them," we have to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors – he welcomed them in and included them in the community.

Eugene Peterson's translation of that passage in *The Message* is helpful. If the person won't listen to the church, Peterson's translation says, "you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." That's what it means to "treat them as you would a Gentile or tax collector" – to "start over from scratch."

It seems that Peter gets what Jesus is saying about the extreme bounds of forgiveness when he follows up with the question that begins today's Gospel reading: "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

In the midst of this teaching about reconciliation and forgiveness that ends with a message to "start all over from scratch" with someone who has already proven extremely difficult, Peter is looking for some kind of boundary to this seemingly boundless compassion: Ok, so, fine, you go to extreme lengths to forgive and reconcile, but at some point there's an end to it all, right? How many times do I have to go through this process? As many as seven times?

If you have been through difficult situations with friends or relatives where someone has betrayed your trust more than once, you know that forgiving someone even twice or three times in a row is extremely difficult. Seven times is next to impossible. And yet, Jesus's answer to Peter reminds us that God's forgiveness of us is so far beyond our imagination and what seems "justified" or "reasonable" that we should be willing to forgive others in the same way.

"Not just seven times," Jesus says, "but rather as many as seventy-seven times."

Translations squabble over how to translate the exact figure here – is it seventy-seven times, or seven times seven times (which would only be 49 times)? The point is not the exact figure, but the fact that it is much more than we would think "reasonable." Take a figure that seems impossible to you and then multiply it exponentially – that's how many times you should forgive. In the scriptures, the number seven carries the symbolic meaning of holiness or perfection – so essentially Jesus is saying "forgive as many times as you have to to get it right" – not setting a limit on the number of times you should forgive before walking away and writing someone off.

Unfortunately, Jesus's teaching on God's boundless compassion and unlimited forgiveness has been used throughout history to encourage oppressed peoples to continue to forgive their oppressors over and over and over again. Passages like these have been used to tell people in abusive relationships that they should forgive the abuser and stay with them rather than seeking help, for the sake of their own souls – because if they don't forgive the abuser, God won't forgive them.

What an awful twisting of the message of this parable! Notice that the message of the parable is NOT that the servant who was tortured should forgive the other servant who tortured him. The message is that the servant who was forgiven by the king should forgive the other servant who owed him something. The message of this parable is about the importance of **people with power** being forgiving.

In both cases, the person who is the object of the story has power over another person. The king has power over the servant, because the servant owes him something. The servant has power over his fellow servant because he owes him something. The parable's message is centered on what they choose to do with that power. The king uses it magnanimously by forgiving the debt, while the servant chooses to lord it over the other servant.

Remember how this parable starts: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." The kingdom of heaven is like a **king** – someone with **power** – so this parable is about how the actions of someone with power can show a glimpse of what God's reign looks like.

This parable is **not** calling the powerless – in the parable, that would be the person who owed the money – to be merciful to the powerful.

I can't think of a single parable that says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a person staying in an abusive relationship." But I can think of a lot of biblical passages that speak pretty strongly against those who take advantage of the vulnerable and marginalized.

Those of us who attended the Kaleidoscope's Summer Institute last month got a lesson in what Eric Law calls the "Cycle of Gospel Living." In this model, he calls us to look for where we are powerful and where we are powerless in different situations in our lives, and to behave differently in those different situations.

Based on stories like these from the scriptures, the Cycle of Gospel Living instructs us to **listen** when we are in positions of power. When we have power, we are called to give up our power like Jesus did when he went to the cross.

When we are stripped of our power, we are already in the position of Jesus on the cross, and we are called instead to resurrection, to **speak up** and raise our voices to those in power, to be empowered with new life.

The servant in today's parable who was unforgiving was not properly using his power, and his fellow servants rose up against him. They practiced the Cycle of Gospel living by speaking up for the powerless servant who was being tortured. The king's response is to torture the servant he had originally forgiven, since he had been unwilling to forgive others.

Jesus's closing statement that "my heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart" is meant to be extreme and get our attention. Like Jesus's hyperbolic statement earlier in Matthew 18 about cutting off your hand if it causes you to sin, it is meant to wake us up to the possible severe consequences of continuing in our stubborn way of thinking.

The thought of God forgiving us only as much as we forgive others is a disturbing thought for most of us, and thus a powerful motivator to change our behavior. I remember a parishioner at my church in Tennessee who used to complain about the line in the Lord's Prayer that asks God to "forgive us

our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." He had figured out pretty quickly that if God only forgave him as much as he forgave others, things wouldn't turn out very well for him!

Is God really going to throw us into debtors' prison and torture us for the rest of our lives if we don't forgive our brother or sister from our hearts? If so, that would pretty much nullify the message of the cross, the message of grace – that God's love is entirely a gift, not something we earn or deserve.

In this parable, Jesus is using strong language to emphasize that if we turn around and refuse to forgive someone after we've received incredible mercy and forgiveness from God, we've entirely missed the point. We've totally ignored the message of grace and chosen to operate out of a tit-for-tat mentality. And if we choose to live with that mindset, we will reap the consequences of that mindset – as the saying goes, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Ending this parable with "and so God will do the same to you" is a way of playing out that "eye for an eye" mindset to its logical extreme to make a point. It's like God is saying, "You want to play the tit-for-tat game? OK, fine, we'll play that game. But in that game, you always lose. You end up being tortured for life if you really want to hold everyone completely accountable for all their sins. And that's exactly why I sent my Son to bring the message of grace to you: because you can never win if it's all about meticulously keeping track of who owes you what. Because the bottom line is, you owe me everything."

In some difficult situations, like ones where there has been abuse of power, sometimes we have to leave the forgiveness to God. That doesn't mean we don't keep doing our own inner work in trying to soften our hearts toward the one who has hurt us. But sometimes we simply can't forgive. We're not there yet, and we can't force ourselves to be – and I don't think God faults us for that. Just as I don't think God sends people to hell for suicide because God understands the complete depths of despair from which such an action comes, so too I think God understands when we simply cannot forgive someone, despite our best intentions, because of the egregious harm they have done to us or someone we love.

But the point of this parable is that the more we hold on to grudges, the more we insist on others getting "what they deserve" or "paying what they owe"

while neglecting to see that God has given us an incredible amount of leeway with getting what we deserve and paying what we owe, the further we move away from the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who chooses to use his power to show mercy and forgive rather than to demand to be repaid what he is owed. We are called to do the same in any situation where we find ourselves having power over others.