

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 14, 2008
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:8-13
Romans 4:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

In last week's Gospel lesson, Jesus showed his disciples the importance of reconciliation in the body of Christ, and the importance of being proactive in nurturing and healing damaged relationships in the Church.

Today's Gospel lesson continues this theme. Here Jesus shows his disciples that in order for healthy relationships to exist in the body of Christ, not only is it essential to have a spirit of reconciliation, it is also crucial that believers live with a spirit and attitude of forgiveness.

In the text, Peter asks Jesus: "How many times must I forgive someone who sins against me?"

Some rabbinical teaching taught that three times was sufficient to fulfill the requirements of the law, so Peter, wanting to go the extra mile, offers his own answer to the question. He says, "will seven times be sufficient?"

Jesus' answer to Peter has been the subject of much debate through the centuries. But I tend to agree with one scholar who has observed that when Jesus

uses the phrase “seventy times seven,” he is uttering a phrase that represents a mathematical infinity.

In other words, forgiveness is like prayer; we should do it without ceasing. Or, as Martin Luther King said, “forgiveness is not an occasional act, but a permanent attitude.”

Now this is all well and good, in theory. But eventually we run into the same problem that confronted C.S. Lewis. Lewis said, “everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, *until they have something to forgive.*” [Quoted from *Mere Christianity*, italics mine]

Lewis hits close to home, doesn't he?

Forgiving others can be difficult. It can be easy to do in theory, but in practice it can sometimes be so elusive. Sort of like licking your elbow. It appears so easy, but in practice is something that is always “just out of reach.”

I don't pretend to know all of the dynamics surrounding forgiveness, or why it is such a challenge for us. One reason may be that we think that to forgive someone involves accepting, condoning, or excusing that person's actions. Or it may be that we've been taught that forgiving someone involves *forgetting* what was done, which we know is not possible regardless of what the old cliché tells us.

When I was six years old, I walked out the doors of my grade school one day to find my father waiting for me at the bottom of the steps. His big black car

was parked on the side of the street, and it was loaded full with his belongings. He informed me that he was leaving, moving to Arizona to work at a ranch. He gave me a hug, then he walked back to his car, and walked out of my life. I stood there and watched as that big black car got smaller and smaller, until it was gone. That was almost 40 years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

I spent the next 25 years of my life angry. Angry at myself, and angry at my dad. In my heart I said, "I can *never* forgive him for what he did."

As a pastor, I've had occasion through the years to listen to people and to counsel people who have been deeply hurt. Many times, I heard them say to me what I said to myself through the years: "I can *never* forgive that person for what was done."

C.S. Lewis was on to something. Forgiveness is so wonderful, so beautiful, so Christian -- until we have something to forgive. When you've been hurt, and when forgiveness seems so difficult and elusive, what do you do? What do we do with those words, "seventy times seven?" What do you do when forgiving someone seems beyond your reach or your capability?

Return with me to our Gospel lesson. Jesus tells the disciples a parable here of a King who wanted to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. One servant was brought in whose debt was beyond

calculation and beyond comprehension. He and his whole family were going to be sold into slavery to pay the unpayable.

But he pleaded with the King, and notice what the King did. The King did not say, “work out an alternate way for this man to pay what he owes.” In an act of incomprehensible mercy, the King forgave the debt.

Subsequently, this man who has just been forgiven his debt goes to another man who owes him some chump change, grabs him by the throat, and demands to be paid back.

The debtor pleads with him for a little more time, but to no avail. He has him arrested and thrown into jail.

One point that becomes glaringly obvious to us here from this story, especially as we struggle to forgive others, is the fact that forgiveness is never just a transaction between us and someone else. *Forgiveness is a transaction between God and us, and between us and someone else.* Our forgiving someone else is never separated from divine grace, from the salvation we receive in Christ, and from the personal relationship we have with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

If we view forgiveness as something merely between us and someone else, it will always remain difficult and elusive for us. But if we see forgiveness as something between God and us, and between us and the other, and between the other and God, then something happens. Forgiveness then becomes an

unconditional gift of grace and a process of discovery, more than something achieved or done from human strength or effort.

If we see only the pain caused to us by another, if it is only about them and us -- then forgiving may indeed be difficult if not impossible. But if we see the pain in terms of God and us, us and them, and them and God, that changes things. It changes *us*.

It took the Holy Spirit more than 25 years to teach me this lesson. Talk about slow learners! But one ordinary day as I sat in the library at Emmanuel College on the campus of the University of Toronto, I sat back in my chair and stopped what I was doing. I didn't hear an audible voice or anything. But in that moment something became very clear to me. I realized that if I wanted to continue my relationship with Jesus, I needed to do something about my relationship with my dad.

Psychologist Steven Sandage says it this way:

Forgiveness involves surveying the damage one incurred through the harmful actions of another and eventually remembering it differently rather than trying to erase it from memory. It is choosing to give up resentment and retaliation. It is an act of mercy, creating space for living anew with a past one would rather forget. [*Lectionary Homiletics*, 19:5, p. 59]

I'd like to think that this is exactly what I did on that day in Toronto. But the truth is that it was something *God* did through the Spirit. Because it was in

that moment that I began to see things not in terms of my dad and me, but in terms of God and me, and my dad and me, and my dad and God. It was in that moment that I realized that what I was unwilling to do for my dad, God had already done for me.

Yes, C.S. Lewis was right. Forgiveness is wonderful and nice, until you have something to forgive. But there is one other source of grace and help available to help us live as God's forgiving people. Do you know what it is?

If you want to learn and practice forgiveness in your life, one of the best things you can do is to come to the Lord's table as often as you can.

Every time we get out of our comfortable pews and walk up here, literally in front of God and everyone else, we confess that we are fallen creatures in need of God's grace. The fact that we are willing to take some bread and dip it in a cup demonstrates to us and to others that we believe it is possible for God to forgive *even us*.

Every time we come up here, we taste and see that Jesus' body was broken not just for twelve imperfect disciples, but for *you* and *me*. We taste and see that Jesus' blood was poured out for the remission of sins, even *our* sins. Coming forward every week to this table reminds us of how much and how deeply we have been forgiven.

How often may we take communion? How often, as fallen sinful creatures, may we come to the table? Has Jesus put a quota on us? Is it seven times, and then no more?

From what I know of Jesus, he would say that his grace is available as long as there is need. And the grace we receive here gives us the courage -- and the desire -- to forgive our brothers and sisters, from the heart. Thanks be to God for this most unspeakable gift.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.