

A Pentecost 17 2017
Matthew 18:21-35

I have told this one before, but I love it. Many years ago now, at the first session of a confirmation class, I asked my students, “What must we do before we can expect forgiveness from sin?”

After a long silence, one of the students shyly raised his hand and answered, “Sin!”

If that’s the case we are well on our way to forgiveness.

In some way, I preach about forgiveness every week. It is at the heart and sole of all we are and do as people of faith. Forgiveness was the reason, God sent his Son Jesus, so that we might be forgiven and saved.

That’s the message of stories like Joseph forgiving his brothers or the Prodigal son returning to his forgiving father. The Bible is filled with stories of God’s forgiveness for us and of God’s call that we forgive others. In all of them it is clear that when we are forgiven or when we forgive another, we are transformed, changed, somehow made stronger and the community is made stronger too.

So there is a lot out there about forgiveness and yet, the process of forgiving and being forgiven can still mystify us. My Wed. bible study came up with at least 13 questions about forgiveness that bothers them.

Things like:

- Does forgiving mean the same as forgetting?
- Do I deserve forgiveness?

What happens when someone tells me that they forgive me and I don’t feel guilty?
What if I can’t forgive?
Can someone forgive too soon?

I’m not going to be able to answer all of our questions this morning but I thought that I would give two examples and see where it leads us. I’ve chosen to use 2 stories from a Christian Century article (August 25-Sept. 1, 1999) so that I don’t risk breaking the promise of confidentiality of someone locally.

In the first one,

Each time the invitation to (Holy Communion) was offered, the man sat silently in the pew. Others would excuse themselves as they passed in front of him, but he never moved. When I visited him at his home, I cautiously broached the subject, “I can’t do it” he answered, “I can’t come to the table. You see, in Vietnam I killed a man. I don’t think God could ever forgive me for that.”

In the second, a woman sat in her pastor’s office. *Tears welled up in her eyes, as she admitted “I hate him. I can’t believe I’m saying it, but I hate my own son-in-law. I hate what he’s done to my daughter and now what it’s doing to my grandchildren. You may have noticed, Pastor that I get up halfway through the service and leave. I feel like such a hypocrite, harboring these feelings while trying to worship God. I just can’t do it anymore.*

In both of these

In both of these cases the person’s unresolved issues with forgiveness were troubling their relationship with the church and with God. They both recognized the connection between faith and forgiveness but they failed to see that their faith,

and God's grace would actually support their process of forgiving.

In today's lesson Peter tells Jesus that he is willing to go the distance by not forgiving a wrong once but 7 times.

That's quite an offer. I always want to give people a second chance but when a third or 4th chance is needed, I become weary of the whole business. I get resistant.

There is a part of me that wants to shake the dust off of my feet.

Here Peter says 7 times....7 2nd chances.

He's more generous than I might be.

But Jesus is not willing to let it go at that.

He doesn't want us keeping track, counting off all the times we have had to forgive.

Too often forgiving others over and over leads us to feeling like martyrs.

By saying we are to forgive 70 or 77 times, Jesus is calling us to a lifetime of forgiveness.

Forgiveness becomes a practice, a commitment and a process that is attended to each day, throughout our lives.

Susan Jones at Duke Divinity School writes that Peter is thinking quantitatively while Jesus is speaking qualitatively.

God's forgiveness is limitless.

That's what God's grace is all about.

And it is freely given as a gift of love.

When we truly recognize this extravagant gift in our lives, our response can be to forgive others.

And Luther tells us that forgiveness

Forgiveness is not just a command but a gift given to us.

This gift empowers us to forgive others

Furthermore, forgiveness is not just an expectation of the faith...something we should do, forgiveness is a possibility.

God empowers us to forgive in exactly the places we believe we cannot forgive, if left to our own devices.

So again we ask, *Why is forgiveness so hard?*

Perhaps that quiet confirmation student was on to something.

Before there is forgiveness there must be sin...or at least an awareness or understanding of the nature of sin. We call that confession.

It's true that God's love is a free gift, not dependent on our actions but we cannot fully appreciate the joy of that gift until we recognize the depth of our sin. If we go through life thinking, *"Hey, it's no big deal; everybody does it; God is love; If I'm wrong, God will forgive me; that's God's job."*

Then we have missed the power of God's most gracious act. We've denied God's authority.

And We've missed an opportunity for honesty and confession, for transformation and growth, and we have damaged our ability to forgive others.

When we don't recognize our need, we limit the power of God's grace working in our lives. I always think of it as a cup overflowing. As God fills our need for love and acceptance, it spills over and we can do nothing else but forgive others...but it all begins with a recognition of the depth of our own sin.

Jesus said 70 X 7 and that's a good news for those of us in need of forgiveness. It means there is hope for us, hope rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

70 X 7 is bible language for as long as it takes. It's the Bible's way to remind us that forgiveness is a life-long, disciplin and a faith attitude.

To forgive 70 X 7 is quite a challenge when there has been a great injustice. Forgiveness, true forgiveness is never easy.

It's not a good idea to talk to someone about forgiveness too soon, when they are in shock, when the reality has not yet set in, when the harm is not yet known. In fact, I would be very hesitant to tell someone else that ***"It is now time for you to forgive."*** Instead, we can trust that God is at work in the life of each and everyone one of us and that work may not yet be complete in the one who seems to have not forgiven. On the other hand there comes a time, sooner than we wish, that God calls us to forgive.

A couple of things:

Forgiveness is not

- ❑ releasing people from the responsibility of their actions. (Never used to send someone back into domestic violence.)
- ❑ saying the offense never happened. It did.
- ❑ Saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We do.

Not only is receiving forgiveness a gift but the possibility of forgiving someone else, with God's help, is a gift.

We need not allow something that happened to us or our friends or our ancestors keep injuring us.

The key, of course is "with God's help."

So, true forgiveness begins with prayer, with turning the anger and pain over to God.

Then the hard work begins as we fight the urge for revenge, the desire to nurse our anger, our self-righteousness etc.

It is a life long journey but a journey that leads to life, lived more fully. It means I may change and you may change. It means that new community bonds are established. It means we find a new trust in God's power in the world.

And here's the good news. True forgiveness ends with our participation in the salvation work of Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness is both gift and possibility.

Because, forgiveness is the heart of the gospel.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ.

This is the good news of the gospel.