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Weekend of Sunday, September 13, 2020
15th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 24/Proper 19/Year A
First Reading: Genesis 50:15-21
Second Reading: Romans 14:1-12
Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-35
Sermon Title: “How Much Do You Love Me? – Part 2”

Theme

When Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus responds with a parable that suggests human forgiveness should mirror the unlimited mercy of God.

Text

²¹Peter came and said to [Jesus], “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus 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. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Sermon

This passage that we have as our Gospel Reading for today contains a set of bookends of sorts – a verse at the beginning and a verse at the end that, in my opinion, summarize Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. And the First Reading also includes a strong lesson on forgiveness. I see both of these teachings from scripture informing us on how we are to live among the fellowship of the faithful in a sermon I have entitled, "How Much Do You Love Me? Part 2" – Part 2 because last week's sermon was also about behavior within the fellowship of the faithful and was entitled, "How Much Do You Love Me? Part 1."

I mentioned that I see that the Gospel Reading contains a set of bookends. Allow me to explain. This passage that is our Gospel Reading is a small part of a larger reading that began back at the beginning of Chapter 18. The entirety of Chapter 18 is a series of teachings that Jesus gave to his Disciples, so if you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, almost all of Chapter 18 is in red. The exception being Peter's interruption of Jesus in verse 18, the beginning of our Gospel Reading for today.

As I said last week, Jesus was not teaching this lesson to his adversaries or a crowd of Jewish peasants. No, in this teaching, he is teaching his Disciples, that little cadre of his followers whom he will soon entrust with his bride, the Church. So the teaching is not intended to convert or to convict. It is to instruct – it is instruction on how his Disciples, both then and now, are supposed to behave within the church, the fellowship of the faithful.

The first bookend is the brief dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Jesus had just taught the teaching that was last week's Gospel Reading, the teaching about the responsibility of the disciple going to another disciple who has offended the first disciple and bringing the offense to the offending disciple's attention. In that teaching and my sermon, it was pointed out that this can be a way to restore Christian fellowship between the two. And I mentioned specifically, that to ignore the offense is to potentially allow it to continue. I said that then because I knew what this week's Gospel Reading would bring.

So having heard Jesus' teaching, Peter asked a good followup question;

²¹“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

So first of all, Peter's question has nothing to do with the godless, irreverent, co-worker, or neighbor whose behavior is offensive to the Christian. No, the question is about another member of the church. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” asked Peter. Now I am reasonably certain that Peter was leading the Lord's response with an over-the-top suggestion. “Lord, should I forgive *as many as seven times?*”

And seriously, check yourself on this. Have you heard the expression, “*fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.*” Well, I think the same thing goes for sinning. *Sin against me once, shame on you; sin against me twice, shame on me.* But sin against me three or more times, and we both have serious problems!

And yet Jesus said about forgiveness,

²²“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Let's be clear, Jesus was NOT getting numeric. He was not saying on the seventy-eighth offense we ought to slug our offender. He was saying that forgiveness between Christians is *beyond calculation*. And furthermore, it points us back to the importance of last week's teaching on taking the first offense to the offender, so we can stop the offensive behavior.

The rest of the reading is a parable about how God sees an unforgiving person. The point of the parable is that God revealed in Jesus Christ, through his all-sin-forgiving death on the cross, has generously forgiven us, so we ought to be generously forgiving too.

The concluding bookend at the end of the passage is the last three words – “from your heart.” Jesus concluded the parable by saying,

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.”

What he is referring to is the slave in the parable who while was forgiven generously by his king, was unforgiving mercilessly to those who were indebted to

him. While this conclusion may not feel very grace-filled, remember that Jesus is teaching his Disciples, those who ought to know better so they can do better, for the church, the fellowship of the faithful will soon be under their leadership.

And about that bookend, Jesus taught that the Disciple's forgiveness must come *from the heart*. There is to be no half-hearted, *'I'll forgive you, but I got my eyes on you'* kind of forgiveness. And this too, points us back to last week's Gospel Reading and teaching about confronting an offender with their offense. The confrontation is to be done with love, with the purpose of restoring the relationship. Presuming that happens, then we have to give up our suspicion about the offender. He or she has confessed and committed to doing better. They should be given a generous second chance.

The First Reading is just the conclusion of the infamous story of Joseph and his amazing technicolor dream coat. If you aren't familiar with the story, it's a terrible story about a polygamous father, Jacob also known as Israel, who showed favoritism toward one son, Joseph. The other sons of other women, naturally got jealous, plotted Joseph's murder, and at the last minute sold him into slavery and told his parents he was killed by animals.

But Joseph could interpret dreams and that proved useful in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and in doing so, saved Egypt from a drought.

Meanwhile back in the Promised Land, which had suffered from the same drought, Joseph's brothers were sent to Egypt for food, where they encounter Joseph, who had become a Prince of Egypt. Once the brothers discover that the Prince of Egypt was really their brother Joseph, whom they sold into slavery, they became concerned that he would seek revenge, and so they concocted a story, included in the First Reading, that they hoped would save their lives. But Joseph needed no more of their scheming, and being a wise and godly man by this time, he said to his brothers,

“Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Wow! What a great story of grace!

What a great story of God's providence!

What a great story of God making something good out of something human beings intended for evil.

And all it took was one godly person to forgive another *from the heart*.

You know, I've been a Christian all my life and I've heard these stories all my life because my parents took me to church and Sunday School. But more than took me, they taught me these lessons all my life by the way they lived their lives. And while I am not perfect by any definition, I do know better and I always strive to do better.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Now, I conclude where I began: "How much do you love me?" Enough to forgive me? Enough to forgive me seven times? Enough to forgive me seventy-seven times? Even if I have done something egregious against you?

I don't mean to make it personal. How much do you love the other members of our fellowship? How much do they love you?

Before you answer, remember who taught today's lesson – the one who went to the cross and bore our sins, all of them, all of our whole lifetimes worth of sin.

It's a challenging lesson, I will agree. Remembering that Jesus was teaching his Disciples, now that we know better, we ought to do better. We need to forgive as we have been forgiven, and from the heart.

Prayer

Our Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us with your lips and by your actions, how love and forgiveness are to prevail in your kingdom. Help us to learn our lessons well, so that love and forgiveness prevail from our hearts and through our lives. We pray this in your name. Amen