

To be Forgiven and to Forgive

Text: Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 14:1-12 (Series A. 15th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 114

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven."

The poet Heinrich Heine once said, "My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and a few trees beside my door. Then, if God wanted to make me completely happy, he would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all the wrongs they have done me - forgive them from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged!"

There can be little disagreement with the statement, *"Forgiveness is not natural; it is not a universal human virtue. Vengeance, retribution, violence are more natural human qualities. It is natural for humans to defend themselves, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when hurt, to bite back when bitten."* (W.H. Willimon)

We have heard people say, and we have said it ourselves, "I can't bring myself to forgive him", or "How many times do I have to forgive him, he keeps on hurting me over and over again," or "Why should I forgive, she's not sorry for what she's done to me."

For a moment think of the worst thing that someone has done to you. Think of the hurt that this person has caused in your life. Feel the bitterness, the coldness, and the pain that this person has caused you. Picture yourself saying meaningfully and gladly, "I forgive you."

I think you will agree with me that forgiveness may be one of the toughest things we as Christians are asked to do. And so we have Peter come to Jesus with a perfectly natural question. *"Lord, if my brother or sister keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?"* This is a very important question. How many times have I been asked, "Do I have to keep on forgiving, if the other person keeps on hurting me?"

Wouldn't you agree that there has to be a limit." And that's exactly what Peter is asking. For him the suggestion of seven times was very generous. We agree. We forgive a person, once, twice, three times, but four times – I don't think we would still be friends after four times.

But Jesus surprises Peter with his answer. *"No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven."* That's a lot! And that's exactly what Jesus was getting at. He's not stating that after 490 times of forgiving someone we stop, but that there is no limit to the forgiveness we should be offering to those who sin against us.

In effect Jesus is saying, "Throw away the calculator. Stop counting on your fingers. In God's Kingdom there is unlimited forgiveness – seventy times seven times seven times seven and so on."

Jesus then goes on to tell this unusual story. A king wanted to settle accounts and close the books on some outstanding loans with his servants. He had one servant who owed him millions of dollars. The debt was so big the man would never hope to see the outside of a prison cell ever again.

What happened to all that money? He wasted it all. No wonder the king is upset. The servant begged for mercy. I don't know what kind of payment plan he had in mind. There was no way that a servant could have rounded up that kind of money, no matter how much time he had.

But the king in an amazing display of undeserved kindness simply forgave the debt, tore up the note, wrote *"paid in full"* on the books, and sent the servant on his way a free man.

The servant got up from his knees, dusted himself off, and went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars, loose change compared with the debt the king had just written off. We might have expected a bit of kindness on the part of one who has just received his life back, a token piece of generosity in the direction of a fellow servant. Instead, the servant grabbed his fellow servant by the throat and demanded payment in full.

And when he begged for the same kind of mercy and patience as the first servant had, he found himself thrown into prison. Now when the king got word of this he was outraged and called back the servant.

"I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you." In his anger, the king had the servant thrown into jail until he paid off all the debt. Jesus concludes, *"That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive other people from your heart."*

Harsh words, startling words. How do those words make us feel, especially if we are harbouring a grudge against someone and withholding forgiveness. These are convicting words. These words of Jesus remind us just how hard-hearted we can be.

This parable is like a mirror. It points out the vast amount that we have been forgiven. We are the servants who have a debt that is so vast that it is impossible for us to do anything about it. Like the servant who owed so much that it was impossible for him to get out of debt, our sin has put us in an impossible position.

Our rebellions, our selfish acts and thoughts, our bad choices, our lovelessness toward one another, and the hurt we have caused others, our pride, our anger, our lusts, our bitterness, our hates, and our lies; all these add up to a staggering debt we owe to God. A debt we cannot pay.

Our only hope rests in the compassion of the king. He was stripped, beaten, punished even though he was completely innocent.

He died on a cross for us. He forgave the huge debt we owe. "Your sins are forgiven", he says. "Go in peace." Then we rise from the pew, leave the communion table, walk outside the church humming "*What a Friend we have in Jesus*". And before we get to our car we see someone who has done us wrong and we want to grab him by the throat and say, "Pay me right now!"

This parable reflects our tight-fisted notions of forgiveness compared with the excessive and generous forgiveness that God gives to us. We have been forgiven so much but look at how stingy we are when it comes to generously forgiving those who have hurt us. In the long run our inability to forgive hurts us more than it hurts the one who has hurt us.

A woman in her eighties told me that, fifty years before, her aunt had said something insulting to her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later she could recount the event to the precise detail, and she felt all the same bitterness, anger, and resentment welling up within her as when it originally occurred.

It was no wonder to me that, by this time, she had become a bitter, grumpy, quarrelsome, unhappy woman who could find no happiness in life whatsoever. Her inability to forgive had tortured her for fifty years. Forgiveness begins when we stop saying, "Look how much you have hurt me," and start saying,

- ❖ "What can I do to relieve the hurt that *you* are feeling?"
- ❖ "What can *I* do to renew our relationship?"
- ❖ When we are no longer concerned about ourselves and how hurt we are, but are concerned about what our unforgiving heart and our need to get back is doing to someone else – that's when forgiveness starts.

Paul says, "*You are the people of God, he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, ... forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you*" (*Colossians 3:12a, 13*).

On Christmas Day, 1974, 10-year-old Chris Carrier was kidnapped. When the boy was finally found, he had been burned with cigarettes, shot in the head and left for dead. Miraculously, young Chris survived, the only permanent physical damage, blindness in his left eye. He went on to become a youth pastor in the Presbyterian Church. No one was ever arrested for this crime.

Twenty-two years later, David McAllister - 77-years old, blind and dying in a nursing home confessed to the crime. Chris began visiting the man who had tortured him and left him for dead. Chris prayed with and for him, read the Bible with him and did everything he could to help David make peace with God in his remaining days.

Chris says, "While many people can't understand how I could forgive David McAllister, from my point of view I couldn't *not* forgive him. If I'd chosen to hate him all these years, or spent my life looking for revenge, then I wouldn't be the man I am today, the man my wife and children love, the man God has helped me to be."

He went on to say, "I became a Christian when I was 13. That night was the first night I was able to sleep through the night, without waking up from my nightmares." He says, "It would be selfish not to share that same peace with David McAllister."

For the Christian, forgiveness is always the last word. The forgiver always has the last word. We sin and Jesus forgives us. We sin again and Jesus forgives us. We sin and sin and sin and Jesus forgives, forgives, and forgives. Forgiveness doesn't come easy. It is hard work. Forgiving is a challenge when the stakes feel so highly charged. Plus, when I dig deeper, I discover that forgiveness received and given isn't a mere slap-dash-high-five-good-to-go. It requires a significant, deliberate, conscious change in *me* without requiring the same of *others*.

Some time ago I came upon the best definition for Forgiveness. It says, "Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself" Isn't that marvellous! "Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself".

The temptation, to be scorekeepers in our relationships is alive and well for many of us and some are passed on from one generation to the next. Most religious, tribal, and political conflicts around the world at the present time steam from scorekeeping and tally sheets.

We carry grudges and we harbour resentments and we tally them up in the hope that the day will come, oh! The day will come when we can "*get even ... settle the score.*" In order to identify with the Cross of Jesus Christ we must be willing to surrender the scorekeeper's role and get rid of our tally sheets. Only then can we identify with the crucified Christ and experience his marvelous grace and peace and be set free within. "Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself".

I will leave you this morning with some thoughts of the consequences of an ***unforgiving spirit***. I will urge you to prayerfully consider the implications these Scripture texts bring forth:

- **Loss of power and the sense of presence of God.**
(Eph. 3 :20, 2 Cor. 4 :7, James 3 :14- 18, Matt. 5 :2)
 - **Rob ourselves of blessing.** (1 Peter 3 :8-9)
 - **Breaks wings of faith and hushes the cry of real prayer.**
(1 Tim. 2 :8, 2 Tim. 2 :22, Proverbs 28 :9, 1 John 3 :21-22)
 - **Brings on ourselves self-inflicted unforgiveness from God.**
(Matt. 5 :7, Matt. 6 :12,14,15, Mark 11 :25, Matt 18 :23-35)
 - **Physical health problems.**
(Prov. 17 :22,18 :14,14 :30, Prov.11 :17,12 :25, Psalms 32,38,39,40,51)
 - **Grieves the spirit of God.** (Eph. 4 :30-32)
 - **Causes Satan to get an advantage.** (2 Cor. 2 :10-11, Eph 4 :22-27)
 - **Affects others** (Eccles. 9 :18b, Prov. 27 :17)
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Forgiveness is not just 70x7 "Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself".

Amen.

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