



September 13, 2020: Holy Spirit, Whonnock

MATTHEW 18:21-35

“All is Forgiven, I Love You”

Then Peter 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?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The American writer Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become strained, and as a result, the teenage son ran away from home. His father then began a journey in search of his son.

Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find his son, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." The next day, in front of the newspaper office, eight hundred Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father. And so today what we get to explore is forgiveness. And we get to explore it through the lens of what Jesus says to Peter in response to a question he poses about how many times church members need to forgive each other.

So--the passage comes from the 18th chapter of Matthew, a body of material focused on life together in the church. It deals with such matters as who from God's point of view is the greatest and least in the church communities, how church communities will deal with people who repeatedly engage in behavior that threatens people's relationship with each other, and, finally, the question of just how much people should have to forgive another in the Church.

Given this context, Peter's question of "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive..?" is meant to be very pragmatic. He actually wants to get an answer, something like a "three strikes, you're out" kind of response.

Jesus' response, however, doesn't really deal with Peter's pragmatic question about how Christian communities should function. Instead, Jesus' answer—we are to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times—takes us into what I would call the "realm of God," a place in our imagination in which God's values are fully realized. And so the question Jesus answers is this: If our lives were to fully realize God's dream for us, what would forgiving others look like?

And what we hear is this—forgiveness among human beings would look like God's own ability to forgive, that is, forgiveness would be inexhaustible and endless.

And so, my friends, what is forgiveness all about and what is not forgiveness? And why, why, why is forgiveness so important to our life in God and with one another? What makes it such a vital part of the fullness of life to which Jesus calls us?

So let's start with what forgiveness is not:

- Forgiveness is not about forgetting, that is, it does not mean pretending something hasn't happened to us, or expecting ourselves to have a kind of amnesia about it
- Forgiveness is not about dismissing, that is, pretending that something that has happened is inconsequential or insignificant when in reality it's a big deal to us
- Forgiveness is not about condoning, that is it does not mean approving of the hurtful thing that has happened
- Finally, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation in that forgiveness does not necessarily require the knowledge or the participation of the one being forgiven.

If these things are not what forgiveness is about, what is forgiveness all about?

Someone, speaking about person-to-person forgiveness put it this way: "Forgiveness is an unconditional gift given to one who (we believe) does not deserve it. It is a person's merciful response to someone who has unjustly hurt him or her. In forgiving, a person ultimately lets go of

negative feelings (such as resentment), negative thoughts (such as harsh judgments), and negative behavior (such as revenge-seeking) toward the person who we believe created injury.

And, if we are able to go to the next level, that of reconciliation, in reconciliation the person doing the forgiving actually replaces those negative things with more positive feelings, thoughts, and behavior toward the person who has injured him or her.

So why is forgiveness so important in our life with God and with one another?

First, to borrow a bit of an image from our story from Exodus for today, forgiving someone allows us to walk out of our bondage to the past, freeing us to live in the present and to move into the future. One definition, therefore, of forgiveness is ‘the ability to let go of the possibility of a better yesterday.’ Think about that. Once we’re able to let go of the possibility of a better yesterday, the present and the future can with God’s help open up before us more fully.

Second, forgiveness allows us to gain greater access to our full humanity. When we’re able to forgive, we move away from thinking of ourselves as the righteous one, the right one and others as the ones in the wrong. We begin to think of ourselves and others, not as caricatures, but as people beloved of God who have strengths and foibles, who do good things and things that can be destructive.

And finally, forgiveness can be the first step toward something larger, toward reconciliation—the reknitting, and reconnecting one person with another, the reknitting and reconnection broader communities with one another. Through forgiveness and reconciliation God is mending our lives, our world.

And Peter asked him, “How many times must I forgive my neighbor—seven times?” And Jesus said, not seven but seventy times seven.” To Peter, who had no real idea of the benefits of forgiveness, I’m sure this sounded extravagant, impossible—even a little exhausting. But this extravagant statement gets right at the root of why Christians are expected to forgive. It has to do with that God of ours. You know, the one whose quintessential nature is forgiveness—the one who relentlessly, extravagantly, indefatigably keeps forgiving us, keeps removing any barriers between God’s self and us, the one who keeps creating a way for us to have a fresh start.

That’s because our God is in the creation and re-creation business—always rooting around for the signs of the new life in the middle of the wreckage—always looking to grow new things out of the ashes—always looking for the new being we can become in the midst of the brokenness of our lives.

Where in your life do you need to feel both the forgiveness of God? Where do you need to look at forgiving others? What new future might you be able to move into should you let it sink in that God is acting to renew who you are and what you do through forgiveness?

I don’t know about you, but I would have been among those hundreds of Pacos showing up in Hemingway’s story seeking to be reunited with someone I loved. And here’s the thing, we can have that. We can open ourselves to the fact that God is forgiveness and that when we forgive, it is the energy of God we are tapping into. For God who wants to transform lives. God wants to transform communities. God wants to transform the world, the whole world.