

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
September 14, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Matthew 18:21-35

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."

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The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." Indeed, we practice forgiveness with remarkable regularity – probably many times over the course of each day. Your child spills his milk at the breakfast table and you clean up the mess and say, "That's okay, honey. I'll get you some more milk." You get up in the morning and discover that your spouse has left the refrigerator door open, yet another time. You sigh, maybe shake your head, and in a silent act of forgiveness, shut the refrigerator door. Your teenager calls you late in the evening with the news that she has wrecked the family car. And so you nervously ask if she is okay and where she is and go and pick her up, forgiving her along the way as you recall being forgiven in the same manner by your own parents.

Jesus' awareness of the very common, everyday occurrence of forgiving others is reflected in his answer to Peter's question, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus tells him, "Not seven times,...but seventy-seven times."

But what about those harder to forgive incidents? – Those times when you have been wronged by someone in ways that have caused pain, suffering, to you and, maybe to those you love. It is much harder to forgive really serious transgressions.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells this story, “A woman in my congregation came to see me. She was a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She said to me, “Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he’s living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?” I answered her, “I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn’t; it was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. By holding on to that resentment, you are not hurting him, but you are hurting yourself.”

It has been said that unforgiveness is the poison we drink expecting someone else to die. When it comes down to it, the act of forgiveness is far more important for the well-being of the forgiver, than it can ever be for the forgiven. Those whom we are offering our forgiveness may or may not care about being forgiven. I would guess that most of the people we need to forgive probably don’t think that have done anything for which they need to be forgiven. I think that Jesus was urging Peter to forgive the person who had sinned against him seventy-seven times, not because the transgressor wanted or needed Peter’s forgiveness, but because Peter still needed to forgive.

We can be imprisoned by our own unwillingness to forgive others. Forgiveness can offer you a way out, liberation, from a prison of your own making.

Some of you may know that my first marriage ended in divorce. My wife and I separated when our son and daughter were very young, and the long separation and ultimate parting was filled with hurt and anger. Although I could intellectually recognize that both my wife and I played a role in the failure of the marriage, for me true forgiveness remained elusive for many years.

Long after my anger subsided; long after my desire to blame anyone else lessened; long after my resentment faded, there remained an image I could not let go of – an image of what might have been. I had imagined that our marriage would last forever; we would raise our children in a happy home, and eventually share the joy of grandkids. I couldn’t let go of that vision.

Although I was even more involved in the lives of my children than most fathers in unbroken homes, my dream of a family hadn’t worked out like I had planned it. And so, I couldn’t really forgive.

Forgiveness, when it ultimately took shape, didn't arrive as a single magical moment. It took place over time, as I began to live into a new life, and to let go of the old one. And it is only in retrospect that I began to understand the wisdom behind the idea that forgiveness is really a letting go of the hope that the past can be changed. It's a letting go of an old story of who you might have been, if circumstances had been different. It's letting go of a mental picture of what life might have been like, if things had worked out differently. Forgiveness allows you to live fully into the life you have been given, embracing who you are now, without clinging to an imagined ideal of how a different path might have looked.

Forgive seventy-seven times, Jesus said. I think it me took more than that. I think that forgiveness is more a spiritual practice rather a moment of epiphany. We practice forgiving in the small, everyday ways, so that when opportunities for larger acts of forgiveness arise, we have already strengthened the forgiveness muscle, and we can bring it into play. But even then, we are seldom able to forgive in an instant. It takes time.

When the image of "what could have been" arises, had we not been wronged by another, the spiritual practice is to gently let go of that imagined image, and return to the present. Forgiveness happens as we learn to replace the memory of the imagined past, with gratitude for what we have now. Forgiveness allows us to fully occupy this space, this place we have been given, rather than dwelling on a past that we thought we wanted.

And each time the memory, the unrealized image of what we imagined our future would be like comes to mind, we get another opportunity to practice letting go and returning to where we are – where we are, right now.