



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 13 September 2020

READINGS

Exodus 14: 19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Becoming a forgiving people

Our Collect for this Sunday serves as a summary of the Gospel message:

*Forgiving God
Your mercy endures forever
Make us know the extent to which we are forgiven,
That by your grace we will become
A forgiving people
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever, Amen.*

Last Sunday's Gospel reading and sermon helped us to understand the nature of sin, repentance and forgiveness as a restoration of relationships when one member has sinned against another or when we ourselves have been sinned against. Our Collect Prayer, while expressing the inexhaustible mercy and compassion of God, should make us pause and reflect carefully on this Gospel passage.

We know how forgiveness has sometimes been utilized by Christians to fend off questions about power, justice, repentance, and accountability. This is especially true right now in our country and around the world, where the crucial call for racial equality and healing is too often met in the Church and in society, by premature demands for forgiveness. **Often, we are too quick to turn the concept of forgiveness into a weapon, and use it to silence people who cry out against injustice.**

However, you and I, as members of a faith community that meets together for worship every week know the longing in our hearts for forgiveness and the struggle in those same hearts to forgive those who have hurt us? So many people come into church every week bearing heavy burdens of anger and resentment, and guilt. This is a human difficulty that persists in every generation and every setting of the church, including our own hearts as preachers and ministers of word and sacrament.

What does forgiveness need to look like in the life of the church and in our own lives? Do we forgive begrudgingly, because of a commandment, or because we have known forgiveness ourselves? This question is harder to answer without delving into the mystery of God as the Ultimate Lover, Infinite Grace as described in the Gospel parable.

In our Gospel text today, Peter comes to Jesus with what he believes is a generous and big-hearted suggestion. The Jewish teachers had said that three times was a sufficient number of times to forgive someone. Peter thinks he's doing great by suggesting that seven times be sufficient for pardoning a brother or sister who's sinned against him. Jesus tells him that his whole approach is wrong, totally devoid of the spirit of God's mercy and grace. Forgiveness isn't something that can be measured or calculated. Forgiveness should be our regular practice, our way of life, our default mode. Why? Because we are first and foremost a forgiven people — a people generously and lavishly forgiven by God.

Peter's question is like asking: "How often must I show love to my brother or sister? Jesus' reply in this parable suggests that human forgiveness should mimic the unlimited mercy of God. In other words, there is no limit to forgiveness. **Seventy times seven, that is four hundred and ninety times, is symbolic of forgiving others as often as God has forgiven us.** Love knows no limits. It thrives on forgiving.

In order for us to understand the challenge posed by this parable of the Unforgiving Servant, it is perhaps important to look at what forgiveness is not:

The theologian, Debbie Thomas says:

Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt, or that Christianity requires us to forget past harms and "let bygones be bygones." Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice. The first step is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, which leads to repentance and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not a shortcut. The same scripture which calls us to forgive also calls us to *mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness (which means right relationships)*. It is an active call to transformation of the heart, for God's grace is free but not cheap - that is, **"the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance and confession.** (Dietrich Bonhoefer)

Forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own time frame, and sometimes reconciliation isn't even possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us cutting ties with our offenders (abusers for instance), even after we've forgiven them. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end; it's a beginning of a journey – not a happy ever after.

And lastly, forgiveness is not quick and easy. It is a process — a messy and difficult process that can leave us feeling whole and liberated one minute, and shattered and broken in the next. God is always and everywhere transforming the worst things that happen to us, and multiplying them into wholeness and blessing and healing. Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's abundance.

The parable Jesus gives us is an incredible story. In it, the King first of all seeks justice. But when the debtor pleads for patience to repay the debt, the king doesn't merely postpone repayment or reduce the debt—he cancels it! The King's cancellation of such a huge debt portrays God's amazing forgiveness of us.

Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel. It tears down the walls we build that keep us at a distance from each other, and enters into our hearts to fill them with mercy and forgiveness for others. Let us therefore, take up the hard work of forgiveness for the sake of a broken and desperate world, knowing that it is a process.

Some of you may be familiar with the Franciscan Prayer of blessing or benediction. There is a more detailed version of the benediction in **Richard Stearns's book, *The Hole in Our Gospel***.

And I conclude this sermon reflection with it:

*May God bless you with a restless discomfort
About easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression,
And exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for
Justice, freedom, and peace among people.*

*May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer
From pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you
May reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.*

*May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that
You really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able,
with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.*

*And the blessings of God the Supreme Majesty and our Creator,
Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word Who is our Brother and Saviour,
And the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be with you
And remain with you, this day and forevermore.
Amen.*