

“A Community of Reconciliation: Part II”
a 2-part series
Mt. 18:21-35
Sunday, September 24, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

This morning’s message is the second in a 2-part series on reconciliation within the church. Two weeks ago we reflected on the Rule of Christ (Mt. 18:15-20, 21-22). We summarized the rule in 5 easy steps. Easy to recite; not so easy to live by: 1) put your complaint into words; 2) tell the person about it in person; 3) counsel with other wise Christians; 4) make use of the Christian fellowship; and 5) never give up trying.

Peter, that flawed, beloved disciple of Jesus, asks a question on our behalf, a question that we all wrestle with: “How often should I forgive?” Jesus gives an outrageous answer: “Seventy-seven times!” and tells an equally outrageous story about a generous king and one of the king’s ungrateful slaves. Forgiveness is important to Jesus, and crucial for his church. He tells an extreme story to shock us into a new way of seeing ourselves and a new way of living together as brothers and sisters in His church.

I. Reconciliation: the challenges of forgiveness on a personal level.

There’s an old story about one prisoner of war who asked another, “Have you forgiven your captors yet?”

“I will never do that,” the second one answers.

“Then they still have you in prison, don’t they?” the first one replies.

We all want to get out of the prison of unforgiveness, don’t we? We all want to know how to forgive someone we’re mad at. On a deeper level, we want to know how to forgive long-

held, dug-in hurts, from as far back as childhood – hurts that hold us back from being the free, joyful people God intends for us to be.

Forgiveness is taught by all the world's major religions. In recent years medical research has shown that forgiveness is important for health and well-being.

Jesus teaches on forgiveness because he knows the effects of unforgiveness. Unforgiveness – in society, the world, churches, families, workplaces – “can sow the seeds of bitterness and fester into deep, painful wounds.” (Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn)

Why don't we want to forgive? One reason is a desire for revenge -- a belief that the other person should do something to mend the hurt or to give some compensation for the pain we have experienced. We want to put conditions on forgiveness. The reason we don't want to forgive could be our own pride. Or, like the slave in the story, maybe we are not fully aware of all that God has forgiven in us.

Forgiveness means letting go. It does not mean denying the hurt we experienced.

Eleanor Roosevelt, after finding out about her husband's infidelity, said to him, “I can forgive but I can never forget.”

“Some events and situations we should *not* forget: the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, exploitation of children and women, mistreatment of Native peoples, the infidelity of a spouse, a lie told that turned your life upside down, abuse, or betrayal.” (Cleghorn)

Today's teaching on reconciliation is about forgiveness. Peter's question is about forgiveness within the church. But Jesus' story is about forgiveness within the kingdom of heaven. Jesus draws the circle much wider than Peter does. For God, the practice of forgiveness involves reaching out ever further – deeper, wider, higher, lower – to find every person who is alienated from God and to draw them to himself.

At the same time, the immediate context is the church. Peter asks, "...if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" How often should the church forgive a sinner who repents? Seventy-seven times. Jesus uses hyperbole. "Seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven, as some translations read – this means "a lot," or "all the time," or "continually," or "second chances forever."

The practice of forgiveness is continual and communal. It's continual in the sense that we never give up trying. The process of forgiveness is ongoing; it's a forever thing. The process of forgiveness is communal in that the whole life of the church is involved. The process of forgiveness is not left up to one individual; the whole church is responsible for developing a way of being together that is infused with a forgiving spirit. The forgiving Spirit of God.

For example, this passage does not instruct an individual woman to return to her abusive husband and to forgive him seventy-seven times. Last week's teaching on the Rule of Christ guards against such an interpretation. The process of forgiveness within the church is this: naming the sin; repentance of the sinner; and communal support for the victim, if needed.

The details of one person forgiving another person are worked out in real relationship over time – relationship with God, relationship within a church family, relationship with a brother and sister in Christ, and relationship with brothers and sisters who do not yet know him.

There are no quick, easy answers.

We find hope in the forgiving nature of God.

II. Reconciliation: the challenges of forgiveness on a global level.

At this point I want to address an issue of language in today's gospel reading. Some translations use the term "servant" to refer to the king's laborers. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, from which I am preaching, uses the term "slave." This is not a reference

to America's ugly history of slavery; but it does give us a glimpse into the ugly reality of slavery in biblical times. "Slave" is an accurate translation from the Greek; we use it with caution, knowing America's history of violence and oppression that it stirs up. We might hold in the back of our minds the issue of forgiveness as it applies to the history of slavery in our country. How do we hold in tension Christ's stand for justice as well as forgiveness? How do we care for the victims as we live into the grace of forgiveness? We can't even forgive our neighbor for loud music or a messy yard; how can we, as a nation, work towards forgiveness and reconciliation in the larger question of historic racial injustice in our country?

We could apply similar questions to the anniversary of 9/11 that we recall every September. We want the terrorists to be stamped out. We are weary and heart-sore over televised stories of terrorist attacks. But do we, therefore, hate all Muslims?

How does forgiveness fit into a world threatened by terrorism and addicted to war?

Some theologians argue for pacifism. After all, Jesus never lifted a sword against his enemies. He did get awfully angry at times, when folks crossed the line...when folks showed disrespect towards God and God's ways.

Other theologians separate personal peace-making from global politics, arguing that the complexity of international issues of war, peace, security and economics cannot be handled in the same way that I forgive a friend, a loved one or a stranger who cuts me off in traffic, or says an unkind word, or otherwise wounds me in a personal way. Interpersonal relationships are different from global politics – so say some theologians.

Still, we are affected, as individuals, by global politics. We see an individual who looks different from us, and we make certain assumptions. They "look like" a terrorist... or... they "look like" a racist bigot.

On a personal level, Jesus calls us to forgive. In our hearts, Jesus calls us to forgive, no matter what geo-political conflicts are swirling around us.

III. Reconciliation: the heart of God.

In Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the king forgives his slave. The slave no longer owes the king anything. The slave is then expected to forgive others. If others owe debts to the slave, the slave is to forgive them. After all, the king forgave him.

Forgiveness is at the heart of who the king is. Forgiveness is at the heart of who God is.

The nature of this parable of Jesus is impossible -- hyperbolic. It's as if Jesus says to Peter, or to us, the church, "How could you ask such a stupid question?! Well, all right, then; here's a ridiculous, outrageous story, in keeping with your ridiculous, outrageous question."

A king goes to settle his accounts and discovers a slave who owes him ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents! – an impossible amount! One talent represents many years of labor for the slave. No way he could come up with that kind of money, even in many lifetimes.

Peter tries to put a limit on the practice of forgiveness. Jesus counters with an outrageous story of the kingdom, in which there are no limits. God's forgiveness washes over us like waves on the shore; we sit in the sand tallying up the debts that are owed to us.

The ridiculously absurd nature of the parable continues.

The slave, forgiven thousands of lifetimes of debt, refuses to forgive his fellow laborers the teeniest, tiniest, most infinitesimal of debts.

The community of slaves reports him. The king hands him over "to be tortured," until he can pay "his entire debt" (v. 34). That's impossible; so, he'll be tortured forever. Again, this is Jesus making an outrageous, over the top point in response to Peter's ridiculous, dim-witted question -- to Jesus' mind, anyway. I mean, Peter's question makes sense to me. I wonder, like

all of us do, about what the human limits of forgiveness are.

Jesus' point is that, for God, there are no limits to forgiveness. Foolish Peter. Foolish church. You know how much you have been forgiven. That knowledge inspires our ongoing practice of forgiveness.

That wonderful Rabbi, Harold Kushner, tells a story to illustrate the personal benefits of practicing forgiveness:

“A woman in my congregation comes to see me,” says Kushner. “She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says 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 answer 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. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You’re not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you’re hurting yourself.’”

There’s a part of us that doesn’t want to forgive. Church council records from sixteenth-century Switzerland tell of a man who was asked to repeat the Lord’s Prayer. He pretended he did not know it, because he knew that if he said it he would have to forgive the merchant who cheated him – and that was something he had no intention of doing!

We worry that no one will care about our woundedness if we forgive. Or perhaps we want revenge. Maybe we want the person who has hurt us to suffer the consequences of their actions. Or maybe we don’t know that God has forgiven us. Maybe we don’t truly, deep down

in our hearts, deep down to our toes, far back to the beginning of time, eternally into the future for all time -- *know* that God has forgiven us, once and for all. We fear, like the slave in Jesus' story, that we will be punished. So we run around making sure others get punished, too. Like little children, perhaps we hope that God will forget to punish us, being too busy punishing that evil-doer over there.

Closing.

Jeff Bridges is an old hippie. He uses phrases like, "you know, man," a lot. A few years ago he was doing a TV interview, pushing his new movie, "The Giver," and one comment he made really jumped out at me. Jeff Bridges said, "We're all perfectly imperfect, you know, man." (The Colbert Report, 8/26/14)

"We're all perfectly imperfect." You know, man.

Forgiveness is at the heart of God's nature. To forgive is at the heart of who God is.

When we forgive, we enter the heart of God. We live in the flow of God's heart. We act out of the intentions of God's heart.

Reconciliation is about being in relationship with God. Out of that relationship, we forgive others, as God has forgiven us.

It takes practice, because we are perfectly imperfect. I invite us to practice, often, the act of forgiveness. The more we practice forgiveness, the better we'll get at it. And the more forgiving we become, the more Christ-like we will be – as individuals, and as his body, the Church.

Some day, the kingdom of heaven will be realized on earth, as the Lord's Prayer says. Some day, God's heart of forgiveness will reign in our hearts, too.

Amen.