

Sermon, July 31, 2022
Matthew 18:21-35

“The Importance of Forgiveness”

At the end of last week’s sermon, I said that I would speak of the importance of forgiveness. Forgiveness has different dimensions to it, beginning with our being forgiven through the grace of God, second, our acceptance of that forgiveness which includes our ability to forgive ourselves, and then, of course, our forgiveness of others.

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, begins with Peter asking Jesus how many times he must forgive someone who has sinned against him. Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times”. This is usually interpreted as meaning that forgiveness is really unlimited - we must always forgive. But I think there is more to it than that. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we find a man named Lamech, who says to his wives, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven-fold.” By repeating the same numbers from the ancient text, Jesus is replacing the need for vengeance with the power of forgiveness. As always, Jesus shows us a different way.

He then begins to tell a parable, known as the Unforgiving Servant” He says that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. In other words, within the reign of God, that is within a world where God’s will preside, the king, who represents God in the parable, wants to make things right with his servants, which can be seen as representing ourselves. He begins with a servant who owes him ten thousand talents. In terms of the currency of that time, ten thousand talents was an astronomical amount - an amount that the servant would clearly never be able to pay. If we are represented by the servant, then this tells us that our sinfulness may be such that we cannot pay the debt on our own. The servant kneels before the king, essentially asking for mercy. This we can interpret as an act of repentance. Consequently, the king forgives the servant’s debt. Altogether, this says that even though we are unable to settle the debt of sin within us, God, through an act of grace, relieves us of the debt, which we can then accept through confession and repentance, grounded in faith!

The servant, having been forgiven his debt, then leaves and encounters another servant who owes him some money - in this case, a hundred denarii, which is a paltry amount compared to what he had owed the king. Keeping with the theme of sin, we may assume that the debt the other owes him represents some way in which he has hurt or offended him.

But even though the king had forgiven him a massive debt, he refuses to forgive the other servant who owes him much less, and he has that servant thrown into a debtor's prison.

Other servants run to tell the king what has happened, and, so, the king summons him and says, "O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded me. Should you not have mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you." The inference is clear. When we enjoy the mercies that God has extended to us, we should then extend the same mercy to others.

Again, the forgiveness that God gives to us, comes as a free gift through God's grace. This provides us with a great sense of freedom because we are relieved of burdens from our past. Things which we may feel guilty about, or a sense of shame, are separated from us as far as the east is from the west. Or we may even be released of any feelings we may have had of having disappointed God. Such relief, of course, comes with our true belief that we have been forgiven. This begins with our having confessed our sin, and then, accepting that forgiveness through faith, that is, placing our trust in God and His promise of forgiveness.

The parable says that the unfaithful servant was tortured until he paid his debt. Well, God is not going to torture us, but that torture may represent that which lays heavy on our conscience until we confess and repent - repentance meaning that we will strive to not sin again.

We are then faced with that which may be the most difficult part - that is, the willingness to extend such mercies to those who have harmed us in some way. This can begin with the recognition that we are not God - that we are all human, and, as Paul says, we all fall short of the glory of God. In the second chapter of Romans Paul says that we cannot condemn others when we are guilty of the same thing - not that we have committed the same transgression, but that we all bear the burden of sin.

This brings us to one of the most telling things about the importance of forgiveness. Part of the problem is that sometimes we may think that we are hurting, or punishing, someone who has done us wrong by not forgiving them, when, in fact, we are actually doing more harm to ourselves. Refusing to forgive - choosing to hold onto a grudge - not only has to do with us disappointing God, but we are doing mental and spiritual harm to ourselves. The Mayo Clinic, says that letting go of such grudges can lead to healthier relationships, improved mental health, less stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, improved heart health, and improved self-esteem.

I think it is also important that we see that holding unto such resentments actually is giving the other person control of our own emotions and feelings. It's time to let go!

Now, understand that forgiveness does not mean acceptance of wrong behaviors. There is also the matter of justice, but, as Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, judgement is not our place. Of course, for the good of society we do have to make moral judgements, but, in the long run we have to recognize that that other person is as much a recipient of God's grace as we are. Final judgement rests between God and him or her.

Of course, letting go of our own hurt and forgiving the other is not always easy. We have to turn to God in prayer for the strength and courage to do so. I find it also helps to look to the example of Jesus, who, while nailed to a cross, looked to heaven and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

If I may, I would like to conclude with some words from Fr. Henri Nouwen, one of the great spiritual masters of the modern age. He writes, "To pray means to stop expecting from God the same small-mindedness which you discover in yourself. To pray is to walk in the full light of God and to say simply, without holding back, "I am human, and you are God." At that moment, conversion occurs, the restoration of the true relationship. A human being is not someone who once in a while makes a mistake, and God is not someone who now and then forgives. No! Human beings are sinners and God is love...This conversion brings with it the relaxation which lets you breathe again and puts you at rest in the embrace of a loving God." Amen.

Let us pray: O, God, ever gracious and loving, we sing praises of thanksgiving for this day you have given us. We rejoice in your presence and for the many blessings in this life. Guide us every step of the way as we face the challenges of the day. Enlighten us that we may recognize your Truth and strive to walk in its ways. I believe that we humans are good at heart, yet sometimes circumstances and temptations arise, and we can engage in that which is displeasing. But you are a God of love who extends your grace, which invites us into a new freedom. We offer our confession of sin and ask for your help in repentance.

There have been times in our lives when others have hurt us. Help us to see that holding grudges towards them hurts ourselves, robbing us of the freedom you offer in body, mind, and spirit. Help to not judge others lest we turn that judgement against ourselves. We thank you that in Jesus we learn the ways of mercy and forgiveness. Lead us to walk in the light of love, restoring broken relationships, creating peace in our lives and in the lives of others. Amen