

Pentecost 15A (9/17/17)

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalm 103:8-13

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Left to our own devices, we resist forgiveness. Instead, we are inclined to keep score, to measure our neighbors' faults and manage their accountability. There's something gratifying about holding our woundedness and resentment over our offenders' heads. When we grasp the abundance of God's mercy, however, we are capable of corresponding mercy. Being forgiven our own brokenness, we are capable of seeing other broken people through the eyes of Christ, who pleads with God to forgive even his own torturers.

I suppose we ought to give Peter credit for his boldness. For several weeks now, he's been the most vocal of the disciples, for better or worse. In the Gospel assigned for last Sunday, Jesus outlines the church's collective responsibility to address sin and seek reconciliation. And, following on the heels of this teaching, in today's Gospel we hear Peter ask, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Stated another way, Peter's question reveals the heart of his concern: "Lord, when can I *stop* forgiving the one who sins against me?"¹ *How much is too much forgiveness?*

Credit Peter for putting himself out there and giving Jesus an opportunity to expand both his and our perspective. "Not seven times," Jesus responds, "but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." An alternate translation has the number at seventy times seven, or four hundred ninety. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, four hundred ninety times." Either way, the point is clear: *Stop counting, Peter. Forgiveness has no limit.*

But, can we really fault Peter for recognizing the difficulty of forgiveness? It's a wonder that anyone who has been deeply hurt by another person can truly

¹ See Kathryn D. Blanchard, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 68.

forgive. Instead, **we are inclined to keep score, to measure our neighbors' faults and manage their accountability.** There's something gratifying about holding our woundedness and resentment over our offenders' heads. It validates our experience. Forgiveness, on the other hand, would seem to remove their responsibility, and therefore dismiss the pain they've caused us.

What's more, if we do eventually forgive, we often do so conditionally. We forgive our offenders if and only if they fulfill certain criteria, demonstrating the proper level of remorse, accepting some kind of penalty, or promising to change. Conditional forgiveness is attractive because, again, it gives us the upper hand, satisfying our desire to put wrongdoers in their place. It reinforces the idea that mercy should be earned, and that we are in a position to evaluate our offenders' worthiness to be forgiven.

Left to our own devices, we resist forgiveness. But Jesus redefines forgiveness according to God's purpose. "The LORD is merciful and gracious," the psalmist sings, "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." God "does not deal with us according to our sins," even as we hold our sins against each other. "For as the heavens are high above the Earth, so great is God's steadfast love..."; "as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us."

According to Jesus' parable, God is like a king who forgives his slave an absurdly large debt. Ten thousand talents is far more than anyone could earn in a lifetime, so the king's act of mercy is excessive, implausible from a human standpoint. This is what makes the forgiven slave's heartlessness so striking. Having been so extravagantly forgiven, wouldn't he be moved to extend that same

forgiveness to his debtor? **When we grasp the abundance of God's mercy**, in other words, **we are capable of corresponding mercy. Grace engenders grace.**

Still, what are we to make of the most egregious examples of human cruelty, cases in which the severity of the violation makes forgiveness all but impossible?

One of my most memorable and troubling courses in seminary was called "Spirituality, Ministry and Survivors of Human Rights Abuse." Our weekly gatherings consisted almost entirely of testimonies from former political prisoners or crime victims, all of whom had endured some kind of torture or abuse. In many cases, they were willing to speak only on the condition that the classroom setting would not retraumatize them. For instance, note taking was prohibited because it too closely resembled interrogation. One presenter insisted on keeping the classroom door open so as to avoid recreating the circumstances of his confinement. Our instructor, herself a survivor of torture at the hands of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, required that the audiovisual closet be kept closed because the sight of the equipment reminded her of the electrical cords her captors had used to shock her.

In view of such profound trauma, it's hard to imagine how a survivor of torture could ever forgive her torturer. Nevertheless, according to one of our presenters, forgiveness is possible. ***As he suffered on the cross***, she reflected, ***Jesus did not cry out, "I forgive you," but rather, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."***² ***I don't know that I can ever bring myself to forgive the ones who hurt me, but I can entrust them to God's forgiveness.***

² Luke 23:34.

What a breathtaking statement of faith. **God embraces all of God's fractured creation with mercy that is unimaginable to us.** We cannot summon that kind of mercy on our own. **Yet, even when our hearts are too small or our wounds too deep for forgiveness, God's mercy leaves the door open to possibility. Being forgiven our own brokenness, we are capable of seeing other broken people through the eyes of Christ, who pleads with God to forgive even his own torturers.**

Dear church, **God's mercy is measureless, constant,³ an inexhaustible source of healing and peace. So, calculating how often we ought to live into that mercy is like calculating how often the sun ought to rise. *Not seven times,* Jesus insists, *but each and every new day.***

³ Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4968>.