

## **Sermon: September 17, 2023**

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

Then Peter came and said to him, '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 should 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 should 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.'

## True Forgiveness

Forgiveness is hard work. And today Jesus sets what feels like an impossible standard. How often should we forgive? As often as it takes! Until infinity and beyond! True forgiveness has no limits!

'What!' we scream, "I don't want to be a doormat... I don't want to keep being victimized and put myself in the position where they keep hurting me! What are you talking about, Jesus? I need to stand up for myself!"

But that's not what Jesus is saying. He's talking about letting go... moving forward... empowering yourself to demand justice and mercy.

In the aftermath of the Mother Emmanuel Church mass shooting, during the arraignment, family members of the victims were given an opportunity to speak. I watched the coverage on tv and never forgot it -- One by one, each family member stood up and repeated the same words, looking the shooter right in the eyes:

*I forgive you. They said. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.*

Felicia Sanders, who survived that night with her granddaughter, was one of the people who spoke. Her voice was choked with pain, but she ended her statement with the words, "May God have mercy on you." Later she said that she forgave immediately and said it was not a choice. "If you don't [forgive] you're letting evil into your heart. You're the one suffering. You're the one hating. You have to forgive. It's for you.

Forgiveness might be the hardest thing that Jesus asks us to do. True forgiveness that comes from the heart.

Some struggles don't end with the passage of time. Some of the damage left behind is so serious that the idea of forgiveness seems impossible. People like mass shooters or terrorists.

Sometimes the damage inflicted is personal too. How do you forgive the dealer who sells drugs to your own child? How do you forgive the bully that makes your day-to-day life unbearable? How do you forgive those who hate you and make sure you know it every time you see them?

These are people who seek to do us harm and they are much more difficult to forgive. And much more difficult to love.

Today Jesus said, forgive not seven times, but as many times as it takes. No exceptions... no matter how great the harm done to us.

And then Jesus told a parable about the wicked slave who is forgiven a huge sum by his master, but then goes out and throws a fellow slave in prison for being owed just a fraction. We hear that the wicked slave then gets his just punishment. "Good," we may say. He surely deserved that! We forget that he was punished not because he owed money, *but because he didn't forgive.*

Jesus is very serious about this forgiveness thing, and still most of us struggle.

How can we make this work?

The first thing to do is turn to God in prayer. We pray... not to an all-controlling God that will transform our enemies into people we can accept as friends. No, we pray so that **we** can be transformed. We pray, trusting that if we keep praying, we can change... that we will find the wisdom to let compassion grow within our own lives. We pray to let go of the anger and bitterness that invades our hearts. We pray for our enemies because if we have any hope of truly loving them, we must first learn to forgive them.

We pray together, every week, "Forgive us' ... we pray... "just as we forgive others." Our ability to forgive is directly connected to God's forgiveness of us. God doesn't ask more of us than God does for us.

**But the truth is, Forgiving is difficult work. Forgiving does not come naturally to us. Deep down inside of us, something calls out for**

**retribution... to right the wrongs... forgiveness without accountability seems empty and meaningless. Our souls still cry out for justice.**

Our souls still cry out for justice, but forgiveness ensures that the justice is tempered with mercy and stops us from seeking revenge. Forgiveness is a necessary step towards healing, but it doesn't undo the damage done.

The broken and bent places in our world remind us that the Beloved Community... The Kingdom of God... is not yet a reality. Wars still rage all around the world... genocide still decimates communities... terrorists still plot horrific plans. And somewhere, a young man is taking out his handgun and preparing to go into a school or a movie theater... or a place of worship.

The evils done to men, women and children need to be eradicated, the perpetrators need to be stopped. The victims will be changed forever, and that breaks the heart of God. Every time

And the perpetrators may not even want our forgiveness. They might laugh at us or tell us that we got what we deserve.

But that's not why we forgive.

- ∞ We forgive because God has enough love to go around.
- ∞ We forgive because we are already forgiven.
- ∞ We forgive because that is the only path towards true justice, hope and healing.
- ∞ We forgive, because as Felicia Sanders said, so that we can let go of the hate...
- ∞ We forgive even when our words are rejected... why? Because...
- ∞ We forgive for ourselves.

Being the first to seek reconciliation is hard, but that's what Jesus means when he says, "70 times seven." The good news in all this is that we are not alone when we are called to forgive or to seek reconciliation. Through it all,

God is with us. Jesus spoke words of radical forgiveness as he took his last breath and God has shown us ultimate forgiveness in the empty tomb. Forgiveness is only possible if we remember God is with us for the difficult journey ahead. That promise continues even when our attempts to reconcile with another or forgive are rejected.

God knows our heart – God *is* our heart. And when words fail us, the Spirit will give us words.

In a little while, we will pray together, listen to the words of forgiveness and let those words settle into your hearts. Only then, can we begin to understand what forgiveness is all about. And then, my friends, the work begins... amen.