

TEACHINGS ON FORGIVENESS

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2014  
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna  
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MATTHEW 18:21-35

*“Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven.” Matthew 18:21-22*

How many times do I have to forgive my brother? Peter, who asked the question, had a brother. His name was Andrew, and Andrew was one of the twelve, indeed the one who brought people to meet Jesus, and actually had encountered Jesus before Peter, then named Simon, had.

It seems sort of strange, doesn't it, that two of those closest to Jesus, two brothers who loved and served the Lord, would be so much at odds that Peter would come to Jesus and ask, “How many times do I forgive my brother?”

Wonder what Andrew was doing that needed forgiving? Wonder what Peter had in mind for when his patience and forgiveness ran out? I can just imagine Peter saying, “Lord, when is it alright for me to punch my brother in the nose?” Or, “Lord, when can I tell my brother off?”

Seven, the Hebrew number for perfection, came quickly to his mind. But Jesus counters with perfection times ten times perfection, a total of 490 times. Well, that's ridiculous. Nobody is going to count to 490 before losing their temper, before running out of patience or forgiveness. The message is clear: forgive your brother an infinite number of times.

Our capacity for forgiveness must be beyond measure, beyond our ability to count.

Jesus told wonderful stories about God's capacity for forgiveness: The slave who owed a debt so great that he could never repay it was about to be sold away, with his family and all his possessions to be scattered and when he begged his master to have patience with him, the master agreed.

Now we can only guess what was going through the mind of that slave as he left his master's presence: “Whew, that was a close call! Now how can I ever pay him back? Oh, here comes that guy that owes me some money. If I get him to pay me, then I can pay the master.” But when the debtor begs the slave as he

had begged the master, the slave threw him into prison until he could pay the debt.

By the way, that's always struck me as a stupid thing to do: lock up the man that owes you, so that he can't earn a living, and his employment or business goes to ruin, and how do you expect him to pay you? I remember a woman whose husband owed her large sums of money for child support telling me, "All the law can do is put him in jail, and then he has a roof over his head, air conditioning, and three meals a day. Don't put him in jail. Make him go to work, and send me what he earns!"

But don't you know, the master heard what his slave had done, and revoked his promise, and put him in prison where he was tormented.

Jesus applied this parable thusly: "So my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

We know this. We affirm this principle of forgiveness every time we say the Lord's Prayer.

I sometimes wonder if people pay attention to the words that they say as they pray the Lord's Prayer. Are they really praying it, or just saying it? I've long been opposed to the kind of prayer that we had in school when I was a boy. We prayed the Lord's Prayer every day. And we rushed through it at ninety miles an hour. Did we stop and think about it as we recited it from memory? I think not. Anymore than we thought about the words to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag that we raced through at a hundred miles an hour!

The Lord's Prayer, and the Pledge of Allegiance, were just words to us. We said them first thing in the morning, five days a week, and if we ever stopped to think what they meant, I was not aware of it.

Do you realize that every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we are saying to God, "Lord, only forgive my sins as much as I've forgiven the sins of those who sin against me."

That's what we are saying. We Presbyterians say debts and debtors, and the folks down the street say trespasses and those who trespass against us, but the meaning is the same: we don't ask God to forgive those who sin against us. We ask God to forgive us as much as we forgive them.

Some folks I know are on dangerous ground.

They haven't forgiven. Fully..freely...compassionately...completely. Oh, they even say, "I've forgiven, but I can't forget."

God forgives and forgets, holding not our sins against us. God's forgiveness is free, full, compassionate, complete. And God expects, no demands, ours to be the same.

And forgiveness is important.

If we do not forgive our brothers and sisters, we cut ourselves off from God's forgiveness.

That's what this parable teaches, and that teaching troubles me. Not because I don't believe it, but because I do.

We are charged with forgiving each other. Period.

I think it was Albert Camus, the French existentialist writer who said that "God forgives, that's His business." (Though the quote is attributed to Henrich Heine, as his last words, and to others.)

Someone once said of Eleanor Roosevelt that she got even in a way that was almost cruel: She forgave...

David Augsburger says that since nothing we intend is ever faultless, and nothing we attempt ever without error, and nothing we achieve without some measure of finitude and fallibility we call humanness, we are saved by forgiveness.

I agree with that: we are indeed saved by forgiveness. If God does not forgive our sins then we cannot be saved. And if we are working out our own salvation, we do it by forgiving the sins of others.

The great actor, Peter Ustinov, once said that love is an act of endless forgiveness. How true that is. God is love, and if God is endlessly forgiving us, if we love God, and our neighbor as ourselves, we, too must be constant in forgiveness.

Mahatma Gandhi, father of passive resistance and non-violence, said that the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.

Now stop and think about the person you haven't forgiven.

Maybe it is the bully who was cruel to you in the third grade. Maybe it is the adolescent girl who said mean things about you when you were in middle school. Maybe it is the teenager who broke your heart. Maybe it is someone who stole from you, or who cheated you in a business deal. Maybe it is someone who betrayed your trust.

Who haven't you forgiven?

Do you realize the power you give to someone when you don't forgive them? You give them the power to separate you from the love of God. You give them the power to separate you from God's forgiveness.

If we only receive from God forgiveness as full and as free as that we have given, then until we forgive that one person we can never forgive, we have not received God's full forgiveness.

Now I want you to close your eyes. I want you to picture the face of the one person you can never forgive. And if there is more than one, picture them all. Take your time. Do you really want that person to stand between you and God?

Now picture in your mind the face of Jesus. I know, we don't know what Jesus looks like, but all of us have an image, a thought, a concept, of who Jesus is and what He must look like. Wouldn't you really rather have Jesus standing between you and God?

What do you have to do, to replace that picture of the person you can never forgive, with the picture of Jesus?

You have to do what Jesus would do: forgive.

And now, with every head bowed, and every eye closed, let us pray.

Lord, help us to forgive the unforgivable. Help us to forgive those who have sinned against us. And Lord, help us to forgive our selves. In the name of Jesus Christ, who forgives all our sins, we pray. Amen.