

Matthew 18: 21-22
February 21, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Music Appreciation Sunday

I chose this passage from Matthew's gospel for a specific reason. Music, well-rehearsed and performed is a beautiful and profound illustration of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness.

After teaching the disciples about addressing hurtful behavior within the community of faith Jesus responds to a question from Peter. "Lord, if a brother—that is, another member of the community—sins against me, how often should I forgive him—seven times?" The question is an honest one. Peter is not looking for a cheap form of forgiveness here. After all in the world most people think forgiving someone even once is too much to ask. Seven times, if done sincerely is an act of great spiritual generosity. There are people in our lives who continually offend against us in one way or another. Forgiving them over and over doesn't seem to have any effect. At one point can we turn away from the person and get on with our lives? After all, for forgiveness to work there needs to be some response from the one we are forgiving. This response tends to be something like, "I am sorry" and "I will stop saying and doing things that hurt or anger you."

As a matter of fact, Jesus has already answered that question in the passage right before Peter's question. If there is someone in the community who continually disrupts the peace of the community with offensive and hurtful words or actions, it becomes the concern of the whole fellowship. The goal is restoration to relationship. But if after three (note only three) attempts at reconciliation the offender is unrepentant, he or she is to be separated from the community. Even Jesus admits there are limits.

I'm guessing that Peter is not thinking of the extreme case. I suspect he has in mind the kind of offense which happens when a group of widely divergent personalities and experiences come together in Jesus' name and step on each other's toes. After all, as Jesus says over and over, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." "It is not the well who need a doctor, but the sick." So, if you are here this morning, Jesus would assume that you are in need of help. You are in need of forgiveness, restoration, healing, or at least some hope that forgiveness, restoration and healing is possible. You are not here because you are trying to look good or protection yourself from all the evil influences *out there*. We all bring all those nasty evil influences with us when we walk through the doors. And this is a good thing because we are coming to Jesus to be forgiven, restored to relationship with God (our children, parents, wives/husbands, neighbors, and even fellow church members, with hopes of beginning a new life. I say "even church members" with my tongue in cheek because actually if we cannot work on forgiving our sisters and brothers in this community of faith we are kidding ourselves if we think we can do it anywhere else.

So when Peter asks, "If a brother or sister sins against me how often should I forgive him or her, seven times?" the question takes on a different meaning. There is more at stake than the relationship between two people. At stake is the spiritual health of the community of faith. It is this awareness I propose that prompts Jesus' response: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Or in some translations seventy *times* seven times.)

Jesus' meaning is clear: when the spiritual health of the community is at stake there is no room for hurts and angers that are allowed to go unreconciled. There are few forces more insidious and destructive than broken relationships which remain festering within a community

which calls itself Christian. They will erode the community's ability to be a safe place to learn acceptance and forgiveness. Worst of all they will model the very opposite of the reason the community exists. Instead of being a sign of love and healing it will become just another place of hurt and rejection. Instead of witnessing to the reality of the Kingdom of God, such a community will be just another gathering of unredeemed humanity.

That is why Jesus replies, in effect, keep forgiving until it happens. By this he means, keep releasing the pain, resentment, desire for revenge and all the other demonic voices which we carry as the result of an injury or perceived injury, until they go away and stay away.

Yet Jesus knows that for this release to take place there needs to be a bigger reason to forgive than simply forgiving for its own sake. There needs to be a bigger reality, something more important than my experience of being sinned against. In short, in order to truly forgive there needs to be a big, big love into which I release my pain and begin to recognize that I cannot be at peace while I am nursing my sense of being sinned against.

It is here that I have learned so much from being a member of the choir. We have a wonderful choir director. She is not only an excellent musician; she comes prepared with an expectation of how we should sound as a choir. When we sing the anthem what you usually hear is a wonderful blend of sound and words which seamlessly flow from one phrase to the next. While there are four parts and twelve singers, if we are well rehearsed there is not one voice or section which stands out. It is one beautiful piece of music which expresses not only the sounds of the notes and rests and tempo and level of sound, but the deeper spiritual inspiration of the composers.

Yet on Thursday night there is no such seamless flow. Our director is constantly stopping us to identify a misstep which detracts from the harmony of the whole piece. She is very tactful and affirming. But she is also very firm about identifying the flaws. We go over a section over and over again until she is satisfied that we have mastered the music. Such is our trust in our director that every member at some point will take responsibility for missing a note or coming in too soon or too late. We do this because we recognize that when one person is off it affects the sound of the whole choir. In short I want to get it right as much for the sake of my sisters and brothers as getting the note right for my own sake.

I propose to you that this is the very model of the life of a spiritual community. The point is not to rehearse a flawed part of an anthem seven times and be done with it. It is to rehearse it until we get it right. The point of getting it right is so that the section of the anthem can be heard as a seamless whole.

This is the work of forgiveness. When one of us sins against another it breaks the harmony of the community. Failure to acknowledge the wound means that it never gets resolved. It becomes a troubling disruption the whole community. That is why Jesus tells Peter to work it out until forgiveness happens.

Yet like the choir, so we as a community of faith need to be concerned for the health of the entire community. We need to sense that forgiveness is not just about our relationship with a particular person, but with the health and harmony of the entire family of faith. Jesus, our director wants us to practice forgiveness until we no longer are focused on whatever happened and we once again are part of the harmony of the music. Amen.