

**Romans 13: 8-14**  
**Matthew 18: 21**  
**September 7, 2014**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

Apart from the spiritual risk of seeking security in this world, Jesus probably spends more time on the importance of forgiveness than any other subject. It is so important that he makes it the keystone of the prayer he taught the disciples which we pray every week: “Forgive us *our* debts/sins/trespasses as we forgive our debtors (those who have trespassed/sinned against us.)”

In other passages Jesus elaborates by saying that if we do not forgive others we will not be forgiven. Jesus even goes so far as to tell Peter—and thereby all disciples of ages—that he holds the keys to the kingdom. What he holds remains in captivity. What he lets go of is released forever. This is the meaning of forgiveness the releasing of the experience of being wounded in such a way that the hurt and anger never come back.

The truth of this spiritual reality speaks throughout the centuries. Show me a brutal conflict anywhere in the world and I will show you people cannot and will not let go of pain and anger that is sometimes centuries old. The failure to forgive has dire consequences. It causes people and nations and tribes to carry the past into the present with terrible consequences for the whole human community. What makes forgiveness so difficult to address is the fact that we who are burdened by it often cannot see the price we pay for carrying the hurt and sometimes rage with us in our daily lives.

In today’s passage from Matthew’s gospel, Peter has felt sinned against by a member of the community of disciples. The actual Greek reads, “If a brother sins against me.” The word,

*adelphos* literally means of the same womb, of the same birth process. Ultimately, a brother or sister are born of the same *love* and have equal access to that love. The love that gives birth to the brother or sister makes no distinction. It is the calling of true family that those who are born of that same love seek to nourish that loving relationship not only for themselves, but also for their sisters and brothers.

Paul in his letter to the Romans strongly reinforces this point.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves has fulfilled the law. Love does no wrong to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (13:8, 10)

The “love” of which Paul speaks is the love which led Jesus to the cross. It is the love without which all of our greatest words and deeds are ineffective and even have destructive consequences. In the community of faith, Paul says, “there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free.” To that list we may add, gay or “straight” black or white, liberals and conservatives. All human beings are born of the same womb of love. That love calls us to see each other as children of God above all things.

Which makes Peter’s question to Jesus so relevant to today’s polarized world: “When a brother or sister sins against me how often should I forgive—seven times?” To sin against someone is, in word or deed, to deny their equal standing before God as worthy of love. In the moment we experience hurt or anger as a result of someone else’s actions that relationship is broken. Often we feel pain, anger, shame, embarrassment. We distance ourselves from the person who has, we feel, treated us unjustly. We may be polite to them in the future; but, holding on to the pain we decide we will never be emotionally available to that person again. This is very understandable. It is also spiritually crippling. Without the call to forgive this pattern

gets repeated over and over. We become like Velcro to which everything sticks. We become defensive and reactive and come to believe that this is the normal way of life. Indeed one hurt or sense of injustice links with all the others. We become bitter and isolated.

That is why Jesus tells Peter, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” By this he means, “forgive until forgiveness happens” Do it until it gets done. Forgiveness is not about saying that what somebody did or said that demeaned us or hurt us badly is *ok*. Jesus teaches that the greatest sin of all is breaking a person’s trust in God. That is why he tells the disciples pulling the rug from under a person’s trust in God is worst thing we can do.

In one sense forgiving is our best most powerful and liberating response. Forgiving dissolves the power of the one who has hurt us. Forgiving frees us to know that the most important thing about us is that we are born of the womb of God and that the pain inflicted by others does not define us and need not scar our lives.

Yet the forgiving love that Jesus has in mind is costly. For not only must we discover that we are lovingly born of God; but we must acknowledge that the one who has offended against us comes from the same love and is invited to the same table.

I do not believe in re-incarnation; but in many cases this is a more than a one lifetime journey. It is also something we cannot do on our own. We must seek the One who overcame our sin on the cross and who invites to eat and drink with him at this table—brothers and sisters born of the same womb of a loving God. Amen.